FIRST GRADE TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF A CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM

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 phenomenological study will be to describe perceptions of first grade teachers at a north Georgia elementary school regarding a character education program. Although the debate continues as to who should instill our children with values, little documentation exists concerning how educators perceive their role as instructors of character. Many character education programs exist, and many schools have adopted their use. However, school systems are struggling with budget issues, and when deciding where funding may be cut, non-academic programs such as character education are often the first areas terminated. Yet, teachers appear to have little voice in if or how the programs are implemented and/or used in their classrooms. This creates the need of this research. The purpose of the study will be to explore the phenomenon of teacher attitudes and perceptions concerning the instruction of character education using the book entitled *The 7 Habits of Happy Kids* (2008) by Sean Covey. Research revealing teacher perspectives on teaching character education through the use of this book will provide vital information to curriculum planners struggling with such budgetary issues and decisions.

*Keywords*: character education, values, morals
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my dissertation in memory of my father, Hollis Sullivan, and in honor of my mother, Janette Sullivan. Both instilled in me a drive to work hard for the goals that I wished to obtain. They cheered for me through all of life’s victories and comforted me through the hardships. I’ve always known that I was loved unconditionally.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must acknowledge my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, whose writings and example led to my salvation. He also loves me unconditionally through triumphs and trials. Without him I would be nothing. I give him the praise for completing this degree.

To my husband, David, and my sister, Shari, you were my cheerleaders. You spent so many hours listening to my rehearsals, reading and correcting papers, and giving up the time I would have spent with you in order for me to work on this research. Without your love and support I probably would have given up long ago. Thank you both for pushing me until the Dr. was added!

To my children, John and Will, I love you both more than words can ever express. Please allow my accomplishment to encourage you in the pursuit of your own dreams.

Finally, I must thank Dr. Jared Bigham, Dr. Anna Cates, Dr. Calin Pop and Dr. James Swezey. At times it felt as if I’d never please you all! However, your support, encouragement and love (and countless revisions) provided the guidance needed to create a product that I am proud of. I hope you all are too!
List of Abbreviations

Academic Knowledge and Content Standards (AKS)

Association for Moral Education (AME)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

The Character Education Efficacy Belief Instrument (CEEBI)

The Character Education Partnership (CEP)

Emotional Intelligence (EI)
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I believe that the citizens of the United States have become a mixture of people striving to be technologically advanced, self-fulfilled, and fully satisfied citizens. In effect, these individuals’ children typically become parents that lack the ability or resources to raise children without their children developing some of these same traits. Bulach and Butler (2002) referred to the reduction in character traits as the “fraying of the social fabric” (p. 201). Further, Covey (1998) noted that children are facing issues that their parents and grandparents never encountered. One example of such an issue is the Columbine High School shooting rampage in April of 1999. As Bulach (2002) stated, “Clearly there is a need in our schools and in our society to curb violence and to have citizens and students practice behaviors that are more civil and moral nature than currently is the pattern” (p. 79). Additionally, Prestwich (2004) asserted that “The rise in violent crime and the public perception that American students suffered a crisis in morals led to the revitalization of character education programs across the nation” (p. 139).

According to Davis (2000), “Because of the reverence most Americans have for the nation’s founders, the nation is generally committed, although sometimes excessively it would seem, to the founders’ intentions” (p. 237). Thus, citizens often blame the founding fathers of the United States for the prevailing lack of morality as a result of the constitution indicating that all people should be allowed freedoms. Others blame the separation of church and state. Some parents blame teachers and some teachers point their fingers at the lack of parental involvement. No matter what prompted the decline in morality, citizens clearly need to re-establish a way of developing compassionate, morally-driven, and well-rounded characteristics.
Background

Pamental (2010) quoted the famous philosopher Aristotle as saying, “A truly virtuous act emerges from a formed and stable character or hexis” (p. 149). What Aristotle implied is that each human being must internally possess the means for making good decisions without basing these decisions on external factors. I believe that with each life created, God instills the components for making good or right decisions. Lickona (1998) insisted that an individual’s character consists of virtues, which he described as “objectively good human qualities such as wisdom, honesty, kindness and self-discipline” (p. 77). Further, Althof and Berkowitz (2006) noted that these qualities are components of an individuals’ character in addition to his or her moral citizenship. They stated that character education is “the attempt to promote the development of children’s and adolescents’ moral cognitive structures in school settings” and that it “remains a phenomenon difficult to define, as it includes a very wide range of outcome goals, pedagogical strategies and philosophical orientations” (p. 498). These researchers also elaborated that moral education focuses on the development of moral reasoning structures as opposed to the focus of character education on virtues and behavior.

Therefore, the terms ‘character education’ and ‘morals education’ are often used interchangeably, though they are derived from different philosophies (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006). Specifically, morals education has a narrow focus that does not include character education characteristics, while character education programs contain areas of morals study within them (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006). Despite this difference, Lickona and Davidson (2005) asserted that morals education and character education “are equal in status, rather than one being
derivative of the other, and need to be equivalent goals of character education” (as cited in Althof & Berkowitz, 2006, p. 499).

Lawrence Kohlberg’s “Six Stages of Moral Development” indicated that all humans develop moral judgment as they move through sequenced stages (Mulkey, 1997, as cited in Brimi, 2009). However, educators and parents have discovered that not all children progress through the stages toward becoming a perfectly moral adult (Brimi, 2009). Brimi (2009) asserted, “The lack of appropriate guidance and the leeway granted to individual perceptions of acceptable behavior permitted students to justify whatever behavior they felt was desirable” (p. 128). Urban and Wagoner (2004) noted that this realization prompted former Secretary of Education, William Bennett, to begin promoting prayer within schools (as cited in Brimi, 2009, p. 128). Specifically, Brimi (2009) stated,

Although mandatory school prayer represents a gross breach of the Constitutional guarantee of separation of church and state, many state officials in this decade passed laws allowing for moments of silence, tacitly permitting students to pray (Urban & Wagoner, 2004). If schools cannot tell kids how to act, officials reasoned, religion certainly could. Hence, encouraging prayer in schools could rejuvenate moral education in youth. (p. 128)

For this dissertation, I studied the experiences of first grade teachers that were using The 7 Habits of Happy Kids (2008), written by Sean Covey, as a character education curriculum. Sean Covey is the son of noted author Stephen R. Covey, who wrote an influential book called The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (1989). The senior Covey took those seven ideas and also formed a book entitled The Leader in Me (2008). In The Leader in Me, Stephen R. Covey
discusses what parents, teachers and community leaders would like for young students to learn. Both of these books formed the basis for Sean Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Happy Kids*.

Sean Covey (2008) conveyed the seven habits through the use of animal characters in mini stories. In each story, he addressed a principle or habit in such a way that children could easily understand the material. The seven habits that he presented include: (a) be proactive; (b) begin with the end in mind; (c) put first things first; (d) think win-win; (e) seek first to understand, then to be understood; (f) synergize; and (g) sharpen the saw. In his book, he followed a three-part progression. The progression begins with having the children examine themselves, next having them learn to relate to others, and ends with having them learn the importance of physical care.

A school principal that supports and uses the book stated, “If we are putting all of our efforts on the almighty test score alone, I am quite afraid that we are going to create a generation of children who know how to do nothing but take a test well” (as cited in Covey, 2008, p. 9). This very thought appears to be one of the major issues in education circles today. Test scores make a school system “look good” so that emphasis is placed on academics. Overall, Covey (2008) emphasized,

Educators are feeling enormous regret from the realization that over the past decade so much emphasis has been placed on raising test scores that it has come at the expense of students not learning some of the most basic skills needed for everyday life. (p. 12)

**Situation to Self**

I was motivated by three books in regard to my dissertation topic. These books include the *Holy Bible*, *Steppingstones to Curriculum: A Biblical Path* (2002), and *Kingdom Education:*
God’s Plan for Educating Future Generations (2002). Reading each book created my desire to study character education and the formation of character in young students. Although there is a wide variation of research findings on the causes of society’s moral downfall, most findings indicate the benefits of re-establishing character education in the schools as a way of reversing the downward spiral. Multiple researchers have discussed approaches concerning the adaptation of a character education program or simply integration of the values into the existing curriculum models (Damon, 2010; Shields, 2011; Stiff-Williams, 2010). Through research, I found that there are many opinions regarding why and how character education should be implemented. I have also found that there are studies indicating the pros and cons of including character education in school curriculums. However, as a public school educator with 25 years of experience, I have found little research on how the teachers feel about their role in presenting character education. Having mixed emotions both for and against its inclusion, I feel that giving voice to the faculty that currently incorporates a character education program provides explanation and clarity of thoughts on the subject.

**Problem Statement**

Davis (2000) asserted,

There is no doubt that the United States is suffering from a decline in morals. Divorce rates are up, crime is up, use of alcohol and drugs is on the rise, teenage pregnancy rates are high, students carry guns to school and sometimes use them on their classmates, student test scores are not what they should be, and on and on. (p. 238)

There is an ongoing debate among parents, school officials, teachers, and government leaders regarding who should be responsible for the character and moral development of children. Many
parents feel that the school environment is the perfect place for children to experience lessons relating to character issues, while others do not want their children to receive such personal influences from people whom they do not know intimately and may not agree with on issues. School personnel are also divided on the subject of character education. Some feel that the role of educators within schools should be purely academic in nature and that raising moral children is the responsibility of the parents. For instance, in *Kingdom Education: God’s Plan for Educating Future Generations*, Schultz (2002) stated,

> We must never forget that God gives the responsibility for the education of one’s children not to the state or to the school nor even to the church. He gives this responsibility to parents. Therefore, the school’s role must be established as providing support to the home. (p. 108)

Thus, differing standpoints indicate a need for further research regarding character education implementation.

Van Brummelen (2002) is the author of *Steppingstones to Curriculum: A Biblical Path*. In this book, he stated, “I show how a biblical view of knowledge, of values, and of the person leads to distinctive curriculum approaches” (p. vii). Van Brummelen expressed feeling as though Western society has nearly ditched possessing a set of morals in exchange for personal pleasure and satisfaction. He explained that with the fast-paced world of today, individuals feel driven to keep up with the consumption of technology, knowledge, ambition, and control of their own destinies. According to Van Brummelen (2002), some educators feel that the school is not the place to teach morals and values, and that these ideals should be left up to the parents to teach. Opposing this view, many parents feel that the school setting provides the perfect
opportunity to “help students to become moral agents who respect truth and live responsibly in community” (Van Brummelen, 2002, p. 58).

Many teachers view their job as duty-bound to help shape children with great integrity and character along with their academic subjects. However, Milson and Mehlig (2002) argued, Advocates of character education assert that teachers and schools have shirked their responsibilities for character education in recent decades and that the lack of attention to character in schools has fostered a moral decline in youth, evidenced by increasing violence, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and similar irresponsible and disrespectful behavior. (p. 47)

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe first grade teacher perceptions of a character education program at a North Georgia elementary school. The axiological assumption concerned the ways in which educators perceive their role in the fostering of moral and character development among the nation’s youth. The Character Education Partnership (CEP; 2011) defined character education as “the deliberate effort by schools, families and communities to help young people understand, care about and act upon core ethical values”. I believe that this definition encompasses the general common spectrum of qualities held among various programs studied. The phenomenological approach allowed me to search for re-occurring themes through surveys, lesson plans, and interviews.

**Significance of the Study**

Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, and Smith (2006) argued that school leaders are torn when deciding whether or not to include character education in schools. Most personnel feel that
declining test scores and failing students should be top priority. Benninga et al. (2006) further argued that “well-conceived programs of character can and should exist side by side with strong academic programs” (p. 452). As school personnel continue to look for ways to cut the budget, looking at the pros and cons of character education from a teacher’s perspective helps to answer the argument of whether or not the program should be included in school curriculums. Thus, this study was imperative to conduct in that my findings had potential to help indicate an answer to the existing argument through my investigation of teachers’ perceptions on this issue.

**Research Questions**

I desired to delve into the lived experiences of each participant in an effort to assist curriculum planners in their understanding of the explored phenomenon. Three research questions guided the exploration of teacher perceptions concerning character education.

**Research Question One**

*How do first grade teachers perceive their teaching of character education?*

This question showed insight on the traits the teachers feel are part of a character education curriculum. It also opened up dialogue with participants concerning their thoughts on whether they should or should not be required to teach character education as part of their job description. Further, this question indicated insight on the level of teacher efficacy regarding student character. Tschanne-Moran, Hoy, and Hoy (1998) described teacher efficacy as “the extent to which the teacher believes he or she has the capacity to affect student performance” (p. 202).
Research Question Two

How do first grade teachers describe the impact that a character education program has on students?

According to Ryan and Bohlin (1999), “As students are taught the meaning and value of possessing personal qualities such as diligence, attentiveness, and persistence and--when these behavioral standards are enforced, then students tend to score significantly higher on various means of assessment” (as cited in Wilhem & Firmin, 2008, p. 193). This question was in place in order to compare participants of this study to participants in other studies in regards to student behaviors and/or grades after the use of a character education program.

Research Question Three

How do first grade teachers perceive and describe the influence that their personal beliefs have on the teaching of character education?

Bulach (2002) stated that character education in schools is looked at from multiple perspectives. “The citizens of some school systems have objected to this process because the character traits are often in the eyes of the beholder, that is, one community may emphasize character traits that are not valued by citizens of another community” (Bulach, 2002, p. 79). From a personal standpoint, many teachers may not feel comfortable teaching or presenting traits that they do not feel strongly about. One’s religious views, or lack thereof, likely have a strong influence on how he or she perceives their role in character education. Teachers with children of their own also likely have an opinion from a parent’s perspective on the teaching of character education, noting that they would rather teach character within the home than to have someone
with a different view influence their child at school. However, some feel little concern over the teaching of character within the educational system.

Overall, these three research questions guided my exploration of teacher perceptions concerning character education. For this study, I delved into the lived experiences of each participant in an effort to assist curriculum planners in their understanding of the explored phenomenon.

**Research Plan**

I utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to collect data surrounding teacher perceptions of character education. I identified three research questions to guide the study. A target school that had been participating in the use of a character education curriculum was chosen as the setting. This location provided nine first grade teachers as potential participants. I collected three forms of data: surveys, lesson plans and face-to-face interviews. Epoching was used to set aside researcher bias’ that might cloud the examination of participant perceptions. Horizalization resulted as significant statements were extracted from participant interviews. Textural descriptions were used to extract significant statements. Themes were derived from the analysis or the descriptions. I then used the statements and themes to pen a structural description of participants’ experiences of the phenomenon. Compositing the textural and structural descriptions enabled me to identify the essences of the phenomenon.

**Rationale for Phenomenology**

A phenomenological method of qualitative research was the most appropriate approach to indicate common phenomenon found among first grade teachers currently embedding a character education program. I sought to identify common themes, also referred to as “essences”
(Creswell, 2007, p. 94), that exist among the team of participants. My approach was valid because I focused on the thoughts and feelings of the participants as discovered through surveys, lesson plans, and interviews. Based on Creswell’s (2007) guidelines, I took “this data and, through several steps of reducing the data, ultimately develop[ed] a description of the experiences about the phenomenon that all individuals have in common--the essence of the experience” (p. 94).

**Delimitations**

Moustakas (1994) highlighted important characteristics for participants in phenomenological studies:

- The research participant has experienced the phenomenon, is intensely interested in understanding its nature and meanings, is willing to participate in a lengthy interview and (perhaps a follow-up interview), grants the investigator the right to tape-record, possibly videotape the interview, and publish the data in a dissertation and other publications. (p. 107)

Participants in my study met each of these requirements. I previously worked in this school setting and had maintained a familiarity with the participants. I feel as though having an established relationship with the participants allowed them to be comfortable and honest during the data collection process. This also allowed for richer and more descriptive data to be collected. According to Moustakas (1994), “The interviewer is responsible for creating a climate in which the research participant will feel comfortable and will respond honestly and comprehensively” (p. 114). Thus, because I was familiar with the participants as well as the setting, I was easily able to foster an environment in which participants were comfortable.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A large body of literature exists regarding the use of character education within the school setting. In this chapter, I have cited several articles about the definitions, uses, and benefits of character education. In this portion of the dissertation, I have shared the literature examined and present a general overview of character education. Finally, I have cited examples of theoretical studies within the field of character education and briefly outline the framework for this study.

To begin, the Josephson Institute of Ethics conducted a survey of 40,000 students in 2010. Of the feedback received, one-third reported having stolen from a store, over one-half said they had cheated on a test, and one-half said they had either been the victim of bullying or had bullied someone within the last year. These statistics indicated a continued interest in the use of character education. Lake (2011) noted, “It may be that our rapidly evolving technology, which has increased accessibility to information and opportunities, good and bad, has contributed to this shift in rising divorce rates, increasing violence in schools, and acts of violence around the world” (p. 679). She stated that community no longer encompasses our immediate town or school, but expands around the globe beyond any visible barriers. Further, she asserted, “Given the tremendous cultural, religious, and political diversity of our world, following an imposed set of ‘universal’ values no longer seems reasonable” (p. 680).

Ferguson (1999) suggested, “Across the country, schools are turning to programs of character education in hopes of inoculating kids with the values of civility and integrity, against the depredations of a popular culture that often seems to reward neither” (p. 68). Further, Roeser, Eccles, and Sameroff (2000) discovered a significant relationship between character
education implementation and obedience issues. Specifically, an increase in integration of character education into curriculums correlates with a decrease in discipline problems (Roeser et al., 2000). Roeser et al. (2000) also discovered a correlation between character education and improved academic performance.

In her article, “Widening the Lens to Teach Character Education Alongside Standards Curriculum”, Stiff-Williams (2010) “challenged policymakers, school leaders, and teachers to implement wide-scale and systematic teaching of character education in every classroom” (p. 115). Her argument concluded that character education engages both cognitive and affective processes. She asserted,

Regrettably, a focus on standards-based teaching has caused many teachers to overemphasize cognitive development to the detriment of affective development. When this happens, character education which has its roots in the affective domain is bypassed as an essential part of regular school instruction. We know from countless sources that successful adults are strong in both cognitive and affective processing. (p. 116)

In the article “Character as the Aim of Education”, Shields (2011) stated,

The goal of education is not acquiring knowledge alone, but developing the dispositions to seek and use knowledge in effective and ethical ways. When we focus on the character of the learner, rather than the contents of learning, we address what’s likely to be sustained through time and circumstances. (p.49)

Thus, both Stiff-Williams (2010) and Shields (2011) argued that schools should nurture the entire child rather than just their academic performance. Sadly, many systems are driven by test scores alone. Administrators are often caught up in the rankings of their district and the amount
of fiscal dollars that it takes to run efficiently. Therefore, the importance of instilling character traits that will influence a lifetime of success is often left unattended.

**Theoretical Framework**

Sean Covey authored the book titled *The 7 Habits of Happy Kids* (2008). The theoretical framework for this study surrounded the use of his book with targeted first grade teachers at a north Georgia elementary school. Covey explained that he based this children’s book on a previous book that he authored, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens* was based on the book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, which was written by his father. Sean Covey (2008) explained that *The 7 Habits of Happy Kids* helps children learn good values in three ways. First, the book can help them learn about the power of living according to principles. Second, the book can help to equip them with common language to be used with parents and teachers. Third, the book can help students find themselves through one of the characters portrayed in the books (Covey, 2008).

In his book, Covey (2008) used cartoon animals with human qualities to engage the young students. Each story evolved in a make-believe community called Seven Oaks, where each animal’s story concentrated on a good habit. Covey (2008) used a repetitive layout that includes the story, the parents’ section, a list of discussion topics surrounding the character’s habit, and a section called baby steps. The parents’ section contained further examples of the habit and led into a set of discussion questions. The baby steps section contained a list of activities the child might do to practice the habit.
Habit One

The first story was titled *Bored! Bored! Bored!* In this story, Covey used a character named Sammy Squirrel to demonstrate how to be proactive and take charge of your activities instead of blaming others for your boredom or trouble. Covey desired for students to understand that they are ultimately responsible for their own lives and what they do with them. He cautions the students not to blame others for events that they could have avoided or repaired themselves. He encourages parents to instill these thoughts into students’ minds: “I am a responsible person. I take initiative. I choose my actions, attitudes, and moods. I do not blame others for my wrong actions. I do the right thing without being asked, even when no one is looking” (p. 23).

In his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, Covey (1998) stressed that teachers introduce, model and promote proactive language (p. 51). For example, he encourages individuals to say “I’ll do it instead of I’ll try.” This is what Covey refers to as a “can-do” attitude. He further encouraged students to learn to recognize events that are beyond their control, and to instead focus on what they can control. According to Copple and Bredekamp (2009),

The highest quality early childhood centers in the U.S. and abroad advocate the use of positive guidance. In fact, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) requires that positive guidance and developmentally appropriate practices be used by early childhood educators in nationally accredited early childhood programs. (as cited in Saunders, McFarland-Piazza, Jacobvitz, Hazen-Swann, and Burton, 2013, p. 323)
Habit Two

The second healthy habit is having a plan, or beginning something with the end in mind (Covey, 2008). Through the adventures of Goob Bear, Covey’s objective was to help a child understand that they can attain goals if they work for them. He suggested that the goal be written down, “A goal not written is only a wish” (p. 33). According to Nuttin (1984), “Goals are wished for outcomes or end-states and are related to needs, they ‘represent concretised or ‘focused’ needs” (p. 162). Further, Lysyuk (1998) conducted a study to explore the development of productive goal setting with young children. She found,

Initially, children will find meaning in their activities as a result of interactions with adults and then master the skill to perform these activities properly. However, the reverse may also be the case: That is, that children will first master the form of activities and then discover the sense of these activities by interactions with adults. (p. 801)

Lysyuk (1998) also found that goals not only determine human activities, but they also control those activities until the end result is achieved. She explained that children will often communicate their goals, but their activities steer them into a different direction. She stated that her findings “support the assumption that goals first emerge as desired outcomes, but only later do children learn how to attain these outcomes” (p. 801). Additionally, Hetzer (1931, as cited in Lysyuk, 1998) suggested that the outcome of activities often precede the ability to develop productive goals. Lysyuk’s (1998) findings indicated that between the ages of 2 and 3 years, children are developing the ability to produce goals though only a small number are able to set and attain them. After the age of 3 years, the number of children not able to obtain their goals
decreases. Further, “After the age of 3;6 years the ability to set productive goals and to attain productive outcomes becomes stable and characteristic for most children” (Lysyuk, 1998, p. 810).

Habit Three

Covey’s third habit stresses the importance of working first and playing second. Through the story associated with this habit, Pokey Porcupine was taught that procrastination will often lead to failure or a harder time completing the task in question later. In Pokey Porcupine’s case, he was taught that putting off studying for a test may have negative consequences. Delayed gratification is tough for children to understand because the desire to have something or participate in an activity can be such a huge attraction. Thus, Covey suggested that the teacher stress how delighted the character felt when he scored high on the test after studying ahead of time. Overall, discipline and organization were emphasized in habit three.

Blair and Razza (2007) stated,

Although intelligence is generally thought to play a key role in children’s early academic achievement, aspects of children’s executive function/self-regulation abilities are uniquely related to early academic success and account for greater variation in early academic progress than do measures of intelligence (as cited in Westby, 2012, p. 1). In the article, Self-Regulation and Delaying Gratification, Westby (2012) gave a condensed overview of the Stanford marshmallow experiment conducted in 1972 concerning deferred gratification. Basically, children were offered one treat that they could have immediately or two treats that they could have after a 15 minute waiting period. One third of the 600+ children delayed gratification long enough to receive both treats. A follow-up indicated that a greater
proportion of parents with children that accepted the delayed treats felt their children were competent than parents with children that did not accept the delayed treats. A second follow-up study showed a correlation of higher SAT scores for those same children. Westby (2012) stated, “The ability to resist temptation in favor of long-term goals is an essential component of individual, societal, and economic success” (p. 2).

**Habit Four**

With habit four, Covey (2008) stressed the importance of compromise. Covey referred to compromise as a “win-win” situation because all parties that compromise end up satisfied. In the story associated with this habit, Lily Skunk wanted space to plant a garden, and she had to negotiate with her mother. The purpose for this story was to help child understand that getting what they desire needs to be balanced with consideration for what others want. The parents’ section indicated that sulking, pouting, or feeling sorry are character traits that should be discussed. Further, Covey used this section to encourage parents to help children understand that conflict will arise and can be handed in a way that makes everyone agreeable. Marshall, Caldwell, and Foster (2011) noted,

> Individuals of character develop practical reasoning ability to analyze conflicting situations and decide on appropriate actions for the greater good. They remove their own desires from a situation so they can judge what to do when various solutions produce different, sometimes incompatible, outcomes (p. 52).

Lickona (1993) discussed the recovery of a mindset that everyone shares in the basic morals of our society. He emphasized that adults must make a conscious effort to directly teach children values such as respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, fairness, caring, and civic virtue.
According to Lickona (1993), these values “meet the classic ethical tests of reversibility (Would you want to be treated this way?) and universalizability (Would you want all persons to act this way in a similar situation?)” (p. 9). He expressed that one way for educators to accomplish fostering these values is to “create a democratic classroom environment, involving students in decision making and the responsibility for making the classroom a good place to be and learn” (p. 10).

**Habit Five**

With habit five, Covey focused on listening before talking in a story called “Jumper and the Lost Butterfly Net”. Children have often acted out when they felt no one was listening to their thoughts and desires. Covey stated, “The deepest need of the human heart is to be understood” (p. 65). He stressed to teachers and parents that in school children were taught to read, write, and speak, but were often not taught to listen. He suggested that children be challenged to go an entire hour without speaking, just listening to others, and see if they could point out the ideas and feeling of others as a means of discussion.

One way of teaching children to listen might be through sociodrama (McLennan, 2012). McLennan (2012) explained: “Sociodrama is an arts-based, action-oriented tool of individual and collective social exploration and creative problem solving that allows participants to explore and find potential resolutions to issues of concern and conflict in their lives” (p. 407). Providing cooperative play opportunities allows children to exchange ideas and to problem solve within a real-time environment. When engaged in this type of play, the children experience real world situations that require collaborative problem solving. It is during these opportunities that “children realize that every person has an important, unique point of view” (p. 407). Teachers
might also plan for a role-playing session with a developing problem. This type of activity could keep the learning situation controlled and allow guidance through the problem-solving step, giving students much needed practice of conflict management skills.

**Habit Six**

Covey (2008) used a unique word, synergize, in this section of the book. With this habit, he discussed teamwork. In “The Big Bad Badgers”, Covey (2008) primarily illustrated learning to value the strengths of classmates and to get along well with people that are different. In this section, parents were encouraged to use a sports team game with their child and point out how each member has something to contribute to the total success. Encouraging children to understand that “together is better”, he quoted Helen Keller: “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much” (p. 77).

Lickona (1993) stressed that teachers should create a moral community so that children develop a mutual respect for each other and feel a sense of belonging to a group. He also suggested the teacher use cooperative learning at times. He suggested that teachers should “use cooperative learning to develop students’ appreciation of others, perspective taking, and ability to work with others toward a common goal” (p. 10). Shields (2011) agreed and referred to the thoughts of John Dewey. He said, “Dewey stressed that schools must cultivate the dispositions needed in broader society and become miniature democratic societies where students learn how their actions affect the well-being and success of the group” (p. 51).

**Habit Seven**

The final habit was geared toward teaching the child how to balance their life. In the story, “Sleeping Sophie”, Covey (2008) stressed that children should be taught to take care of
their body, heart, mind, and soul in order to feel their best. This habit is called “sharpening the saw”. As Covey (2008) stated, “Let us never be too busy sawing to take time to sharpen the saw” (p. 89). Using the tires on a car as a visual, he told children, that a car simply doesn’t run smoothly if something is wrong with one of the tires.

In his previous book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, Covey (1998) explained that the body referred to the physical dimension: exercise, healthy diet, sufficient sleep, and relaxation. Further, the brain referred to the mental dimension: reading, education, writing, and learning new skills. The heart referred to the emotional dimension: building relationships, giving service, and laughing. Finally, the soul referred to the spiritual dimension: mediating, keeping a journal, praying, and taking in quality media. Covey stated, “To perform at your peak, you need to strive for balance in all four areas” (p. 207). Covey’s (1998) *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens* book served as a good resource for teachers desiring to explore and teach the *The 7 Habits of Happy Kids* more thoroughly. Within the chapter concerning the soul, Covey shared,

I also got strength from inspiring quotes, such as this one by past U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson: ‘Men and women who turn their lives over to God will find out that He can make a lot more out of their lives than they can. He will deepen their joys, expand their vision, quicken their minds, strengthen their muscles, lift their spirits, multiply their blessings, increase their opportunities, and pour out peace.’” (p. 234)

**Summary of Theoretical Framework**

Children cannot be expected to conduct themselves with appropriate actions or words without having received some type of guidance. *The 7 Habits of Happy Kids* shows appropriate examples of both actions and words in child-friendly stories. Covey (2008) wrote this book in
such a way that the stories can be used effectively with individual students, an entire classroom, an entire school, or even an entire system. Carter and Pool (2012) promoted school-wide instruction because it helps with consistency as well as helping to spread the workload. They asserted, “Children thrive in effective environments that are consistent, predictable, positive and safe. Defining and teaching behavioral expectations is a primary and foundational component of this” (p. 321). Covey (2008) intended for *The 7 Habits of Happy Kids* to help educators achieve this environment.

### Study Type

My study was phenomenological in nature because the teachers’ opinions were incorporated into my research. The overall purpose was to address the question of whose place it is to foster character development among the nation’s youth. As stated previously, many parents feel that this responsibility should belong to the school, while educators prefer to concentrate on academic performance.

Althof and Berkowitz (2006) debated the differences between moral education and character education. They asserted,

> There is substantial overlap between the character education and moral education “camps”, evidenced by a large number of North American members of the Association for Moral Education who also belong to the Character Education Partnership. In fact, numerous character educators have incorporated moral development into their character education models. (p. 498)

In my study, I used the influence of Berkowitz and Bier (2007) who contended that “effective character education programs frequently target moral development and implement moral
discussion in classroom” (p. 498). Further, Pamental (2010) supported this by stating, “A Deweyan social psychology of character not only accounts for situations results, but it also leaves open the possibility that moral education could be effective in improving character” (p. 147). Overall, these statements indicated that I examined research that targeted both character education and moral education. My research moved forward with this perspective.

**Related Literature**

To better critique the data that I collected, I investigated the terms character education and moral education for a better sense of their definitions and uses. I also investigated the history and justification of character education. In 2011, The U.S. Department of Education described character education as “a learning process that enables students and adults in a school community to understand, care about and act on core ethical values such as respect, justice, civic virtue and citizenship, and responsibility for self and others” (para. 5). Melson & Mehlig (2002) also use the wording “ethical values” when defining the process of having students understand, believe in, and act with character (p. 47). Additionally, “Bennett (1992), a prominent public figure and proponent of character education, wrote that children do not innately understand all aspects of right and wrong” (as cited in Wilhelm & Firmin, 2008, p. 184). Bennett (1992) further emphasized, “Without deliberate instruction, moral messages may not become embedded into the fiber of children’s lives and personal constructs” (as cited in Wilhelm & Firmin, 2008, p. 184).

In his article, “The Return of Character Education”, Lickona (1993) stated:

We do share a basic morality, essential for our survival; that adults must promote this morality by teaching the young, directly and indirectly, such values as respect,
responsibility, trustworthiness, fairness, caring, and civic virtues; and that these values are not merely subjective preferences but that they have objective worth and a claim on our collective conscience. (p. 9)

Through this statement, Lickona (1993) emphasized the importance of integrating character education into current curriculum in order to benefit America.

Brimi (2009) also explored the role of teachers in relation to moral development of American students. For instance, he stated,

In colonial America, educators primarily trained children to act morally and in the confines of religious expectations. Although the goals of schooling gradually evolved from acculturation to producing economically viable students and to training students who could compete in a global economic market, the amount of attention paid to moral education has lessened. (p. 126)

I believe Brimi’s statement is true. This nation has shifted from rearing children that worked toward self-achievement and toward benefiting the common good to rearing children concerned with self-promotion, success, and achievement, without regard to others. As stated previously, Van Brummelen (2002) expressed feeling that Western society has nearly ditched possessing a set of morals in exchange for personal pleasure and satisfaction. He additionally expressed that in today’s fast-paced world, individuals feel driven to keep up with the consumption of technology, knowledge, success, and control of their own destinies. Thus, Van Brummelen’s thoughts support the idea that the nation has shifted. Over the years, educators have recognized this decline in the common good and have begun stressing the importance of re-establishing moral and ethical values training within the school setting. Viadero (2003) stated:
What experts have found is that comprehensive, effective programs aimed at nurturing positive character traits and social skills in children often contain many of the same ingredients as comprehensive, effective programs designed to prevent violence, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and a host of other negative outcomes.

White and Warfa (2011) conducted an investigation on character education among schools in the United Kingdom. These researchers found that “children from the early years onward are engaged in mediated learning experiences designed to facilitate the characteristics of conscientiousness, agreeableness, and a confidence that allows children to be open to new experiences” (p. 47). As mentioned previously, Stiff-Williams (2010) “challenged policymakers, school leaders, and teachers to implement wide-scale and systematic teaching of character” (p. 115). Stiff-Williams further explains that “students need ‘decision-filters’ that can be integrated naturally with and taught alongside any state’s standards-based curriculum” (p. 115). White and Warfa (2011) and Pamental (2010) had similar findings within their studies. Both studies indicated that when students are taught character traits and morals through situations, they develop an internal ability to make better choices.

In Steppingstones to Curriculum: A Biblical Path, Van Brummelen (2002) recognized that the Bible commands parents to be their child’s first teacher. However, government has created an atmosphere of control because it handles the funding for education. Van Brummelen (2002) expressed that the role of the government should only include setting minimum standards and providing a safe and secure environment. Additionally, Dewey (1915) felt that moral instruction was part of a teacher’s “calling” (p. 184). Teachers “wield much power in deciding their pedagogy, content choice, activities, and resources” (Van Brummelen, 2002, p. 138).
The role of the teacher is to “help build bridges” (Damon, 2010, p. 39). Damon (2010) suggested that educators must take students from what experiences they have had and guide them into becoming adults with moral character. Adler, the creator of Individual Psychology, felt that each person should develop what he called a “social interest” (Milliren & Messer, 2009, p. 20). Milliren and Messer (2009) stated, “According to Adler, social interest or character had to be consciously developed. Therefore, it becomes the function of education (families and schools) and educators (parents and teachers) to convert this potential into an ability or skill” (p. 20).

Berkowitz and Bier (2005) and Brannon (2008) agreed that teaching character should be a joint effort between the school and home. Specifically, Berkowitz and Bier (2005) stated, “Although school has a central role in developing students’ character; the most profound impact on students’ development comes from their families” (p. 65). Similarly, Brannon (2008) asserted, “Instilling positive character trait in children requires teachers, parents, and administrators to work together” (p. 62). Together, these statements indicate that teachers are often thought of as surrogate parents because children tend to spend more hours at school than at home. On the flip side, teachers feel that parents should serve as home educators by reinforcing what is taught at school. Bulach (2002) pointed out that educators, parents, and communities must all be involved in fostering appropriate behaviors. Bulach (2002) stated:

Teachers use a curriculum guide as a resource, and it is taught at a certain time of the day or week. This may cause some change in students’ character, but for any significant change to occur, the curriculum must be infused throughout the entire school day. Parents and the community must also be involved to reinforce character outside the school. (p. 81)
Further, Li and Xiong (2013) also expressed the opinion that morality should be a joint effort. They stated, “Cultivation of moral belief needs to be conducted in the school and social education and also requires the joint participation of the whole society” (p. 110).

Wilhelm and Firmin (2008) cited the demise of family as a huge issue in regards to a child’s healthy character development. Children were once brought up to look toward family for their formation of values. With the multitude of broken homes that currently exist, children often are not sure whether to follow their home values or the values taught at school. This creates confusion among students and should create concern among educators. As stated previously, Milson and Mehlig (2002) asserted that

Advocates of character education assert that teachers and schools have shirked their responsibilities for character education in recent decades and that the lack of attention to character in schools has fostered a moral decline in youth, evidenced by increasing violence, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and similar irresponsible and disrespectful behavior. (p. 47)

In support of this statement, Damon (2010) stated:

It is the vital responsibility of every school to work with the vigorous moral sense that students bring with them in a way that turns these inclinations into solutions for the ethical challenges students will confront. In a world where parents are not always on the scene and many communities have disintegrated, the bridge from a student’s natural moral sense to the student’s established moral character runs through the school. (p. 38)

Proponents of character education have stressed that intellectual character is developed along with content knowledge if taught simultaneously (Shields, 2011). Additionally, Stiff-
Williams (2010) asserted, “Rather than adding a new course to an already overloaded school curriculum, character education should be integrated with other subject areas and routinely taught through all classes and by all teachers” (p. 115).

**Children’s Rights**

In 2012, Newman examined opposing views surrounding character development and the children’s rights. Her stance claimed that the conflict usually arises between the view of the parent and the view of the school, neither of which considers the rights of the child. The first view was referred to as the “liberal chooser” (p. 91) and the second was referred to as the “right not to become a liberal chooser” (p. 92). She explained that proponents of the liberal chooser favored the allowance of free choice. “Children have a ‘right to an open future,’ whereby they can select from a wide range of options the way of life for which they are best suited” (Newman, 2012, p. 91).

In contrast, the fundamentalist perspective purports that “children have a right to live a good life according to religious values they have not chosen but nevertheless affirm” (Newman, 2012, p.91). Newman’s liberal position encouraged parents to either expose their children to diversities from which they could develop their own critical thinking skills or to allow the school to develop these skills without interference. According to Feinberg (1981, as cited in Newman, 2012, p. 136),

Autonomous decision making requires that children can achieve some distance from the worldviews in which they were raised in order to critically evaluate them and compare them to other options. This also requires exposure to diversity, so that children may learn
about other lifestyles and determine which, if any, might offer their lives more meaning and satisfaction.

Overall, Newman (2012) explained that though each person enters the world with genetic dispositions, “the formation of our character is a deeply interactive process, whereby genetic dispositions are but one ingredient in a very complicated recipe” (p. 96).

Newman (2012) asserted that educators must model respect for a students’ values and beliefs when they are entered into discussions. She pointed out that though students or teachers may not agree with all views, these views should always be treated with tolerance. This practice models how “the important dimension of the right to respect in public institutions is the comportment of teachers. Clearly this cannot be perfectly controlled for, but respectful interactions among teachers and students should be an explicit goal in educational settings” (Newman, 2012, p. 105). Ensuring this respect grants students the opportunity to make their own choices. From the fundamentalist perspective, Newman addressed this idea as the right not to become a liberal chooser. This choice allows children to weigh the pros and cons for themselves, and then to make their own choice to allow openness to liberal views or to choose to follow the fundamentalist values that they hold dear.

This is precisely what fundamentalist fears: liberal educations that loosens attachments and helps us recognize how we might have turned out differently. This detachment may induce some children to reject the values with which they were raised. And even if children ultimately affirm their fundamentalist worldview, they have been subjected to the moral uncertainty that choice represents. (Newton, 2012, p. 99)
Newton’s opinion, once again, pointed to the dilemma of who should choose whether character education and morals are addressed in the school setting.

Morgan (2005) argued that religious parents can plausibly raise a child within specific religious traditions without deleting the child’s right to make their own choices. He asserted:

It is widely accepted that parents have a moral right to introduce their own child into a specific religious faith. Even fanatics might concede that interfering with parents’ religious aspirations for their child is apt to lead to more harm than good for the child—familial harmony will be disrupted; loving relations between parent and child will be endangered. (p. 367)

Further, Morgan recognized that a religious connection provides moral strength during adversity and gives meaning to one’s life.

For the believer, religion provides one with the belief that events of life make sense within a broader scheme, and this often supports the believer in maintaining the courage to confront deaths, illnesses and disappointments; in addition, it supports one in the courage to form and pursue important life plans. (p. 368)

He indicated that limiting parental authority is too restrictive. Further, he expressed that parents have every right to lead and guide their children toward a particular religious faith as long as the parent remains open to allowing the child to develop their own preferences based upon their emerging identity. He indicated that character and moral education within a school setting should not strive to indoctrinate children toward any particular philosophy or religion. Instead, these programs should reflect that our world is a multicultural society with a vast variety of
religious beliefs. The way in which individuals function and relate to others should remain the sole purpose to character and moral education. He stated:

This means that, on pain of violating the child’s right to open future, religious parents who want their children to be initiated into the faith, must teach children *to* and *how to* appreciate and learn from religious difference (Morgan, 2005, p. 386).

**Academic Achievement**

Althof and Berkowitz (2006) described academic motivation as “cognitive engagement in school, learning motivation, and improvements in grade point average” (p. 506). As mentioned previously, character development has a positive influence on student assessment scores (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999, as cited in Wilhelm & Firmin, 2008). Brannon (2008) interviewed National Board Certified Teachers in Illinois incorporating a character education program, and they consistently agreed: “Students’ learning and demonstration of positive behaviors have improved, increasing their time on task and enjoyment of academics” (p. 57). Additionally, Benninga et al. (2006) conducted a study in California in order to compare academic achievement between schools that included character education as a part of the curriculum and schools that did not include character education as a part of the curriculum. These researchers discovered the following:

Over a multi-year period from 1999 to 2002, higher rankings on the API and higher scores on the SAT-9 were significantly and positively correlated with four of our character education indicators: a school’s ability to ensure a clean and safe physical environment; evidence that a school’s parents and teachers modeled and promoted good character; high-quality opportunities at the school for students to contribute in
meaningful ways to the school and its community; and promoting a caring community and positive social relationships. (p. 450)

Barna and Brott (2011) discussed the role that school counselors played in the advancement of personal and social development. Often, a counselor goes into the regular education classroom and delivers lessons on character development as a supplement or enhancement to the teacher’s curriculum. Bama and Brott focused on counselor perceptions of “importance and implementation for state standards in support of academic achievement” (p. 242). They discovered five reasons that a direct link is difficult to show between counselors and academics. First, there is a lack of research from which to draw conclusions. Second, counselors promote a variety of skills, not just academics. This makes it impossible to know which components could be responsible for academic success. Third, the primary responsibility for academic success lies on the shoulders of the classroom teacher. Counselors are often left out of conversations promoting academic success. Fourth, the roles of school counselors vary widely from school to school, district to district, and state to state. This variability implies that they are not always considered responsible for student academics. Finally, Barna and Brott stated:

Pressure from high-stakes testing has created an overemphasis on interventions that exclusively focus on improving students’ academic competence (e.g., test scores, grades, graduation rates), resulting in a failure to appreciate programs and services that strengthen areas of academic success for all students. (p. 243)

Despite the lack of a direct relationship between counselors and academic achievement, Scheel and Gonzalez (2007) acknowledged that students must possess the attributes of
motivation, self-efficacy, intentionality, and purposefulness in order to thrive academically. These are all traits that counselors seek to teach and reinforce. Parker et al. (2004) concurred, “When emotional intelligence (EI) is identified as interpersonal skills, adaptability and stress management, its presence has a positive impact on the academic achievement of students as measured by overall grade point average” (as cited in Barna & Brott, 2011, p. 243).

In another recent study, Mavroveli and Sanchez-Ruiz (2011) examined emotional intelligence in an attempt to find a correlation between academic achievement and school behavior. The researchers noted that many studies have been conducted over the years among personality, academic performance, and socioemotional adjustment at school. The first step of their study was to review previous studies comparing the effects of emotional intelligence on academic achievement. For their study, SAT scores were obtained in math, reading, and writing for children in grades 1-6. Findings indicated no relationship between EI and intelligence or its proxies. However, these researchers did find a significant relationship between third grade students and the SAT math scores. Mavroveli and Sanchez-Ruiz believed that further research was needed to reveal any association between EI and academic achievement. “This is because trait EI, and personality overall, cannot alone explain the variability in such a multicomponential construct” (p. 125).

Findings such as these indicate significant results for school leaders that are struggling with diminishing test scores. Teachers that are employed in school systems where personal evaluations are based upon student performance may view the inclusion of a character education program as essential in order to improve test scores for their students. Additionally, results such as Benninga et al.’s (2006) could serve as an encouragement for parents debating the inclusion of
character education within the curriculum. However, researchers such as Mavroveli and Sanchez-Ruiz that have found no correlation between socioemotional competence and test scores may convince curriculum personnel and educators that character education is not worth the time, effort, or cost involved in the implementation of such a program.

**Community Service and Service Learning**

In their study, Milliren and Messer (2009) reviewed an interesting approach that they call “Invitations’ to Character” (p. 19). They purported that character education traits cannot be directly taught to children, but that using positive reinforcement of desired behavior is the key to instilling appropriate actions and words. The approach is simply to listen when students are talking and to reinforce character components that are deemed desirable within the conversation. Milliren and Messer (2009) were “deliberately pointing out a ‘character’istic belonging to the student that he or she may not even recognize that he or she holds!” (p. 20). Findings of Purkey and Novak (1984; 2008) also indicated that this use of positive reinforcement “is an excellent way to be professionally inviting with others, to invite them to realize their potential and meet the needs of society” (as cited in Milliren & Messer, 2009, p. 20).

Althof and Berkowitz (2006), focused on two areas of character and citizenship education: community service and service learning. They maintained that community service and service-learning can contribute significantly to increases in a variety of civic skills and attitudes. Bulach and Butler (2002) emphasized that

Proponents of character education long for a rather Utopian-like, orderly place where everyone is courteous and respectful; where good is praised and bad is punished.

Proponents of character education believe the egregious behavior reported routinely on
the nightly news is simply a consequence of the failure of schools to instill in children and young people the proper values. (p. 201)

This view indicates that corrupt behavior and actions are at the root of the problem. All supporters of character education programs aspire to influence student values and morals through the teaching of appropriate behaviors. However, Bulach (2002) pointed out that educators, parents, and communities must all be involved in fostering appropriate behaviors. Bulach (2002) states:

Teachers use a curriculum guide as a resource, and it is taught at a certain time of the day or week. This may cause some change in students’ character, but for any significant change to occur, the curriculum must be infused throughout the entire school day. Parents and the community must also be involved to reinforce character outside the school. (p. 81)

Bulach and Butler (2002) stated that this type of curriculum integration “often creates a backlash from teachers, who complain about having one more thing to teach, and can bring complaints from parents who object to what is being taught” (p. 203).

Despite these objections, Marshall et al. (2011) pointed out, “Adults and children enter school settings from varied backgrounds with diverse social beliefs and understandings, therefore, educators must intentionally develop shared social norms and moral understanding within the school community” (p. 52). Furthermore, Marshall et al. stated:

A school of character is a community that begins by establishing social conventions within community traditions and continues with moral development through role-modeling, student, home and community interactions, student discussion and reflection,
and students’ active involvement in their own learning. Thus, character development is integrated into all aspects of students’ learning experiences. (p. 53)

Scott (2012) wrote about the intersection of service-learning and moral growth. He recalled the work of Kohlberg (1971) involving how real-world experiences challenged the student to critically process and reflect. When used consistently, “It is more likely that they (students) will encounter the cognitive dissonance needed to activate moral growth” (Kohlberg, 1971, as cited in Scott, 2012, p. 29). Scott (2012) believed, “High school service experiences, family values, and faith perspectives are influential factors in students’ precollege level of moral development” (p. 28). In 2012, he examined postsecondary service-learning pedagogy. Within his research, he found that students that engaged in service-learning courses exhibited a higher level of moral growth as opposed to those that did not participate in service-learning. As a service-learning instructor, Scott cautioned educators to be guarded when assuming what experiences students may have already encountered. Many students have completed grades K-12 having never been involved in any type of community service project. Although specific research on the impact of service-learning and moral growth is still in early development, there are strong indications that service-learning courses support psychosocial development in areas such as appreciation of diversity, empathy, concern for social justice, and greater sense of personal efficacy and problem solving (Astin, Sax, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Marichal, 2010). Overall, these findings might serve as encouragement to elementary, middle and high school personnel that have considered beginning or continuing a character education program.
Li and Xiong (2013) examined the reasons for low efficiency in moral education in ideological and political education in China. They felt that the connection between moral belief and emotion were strong. They asserted, “People with deep moral emotion have firm moral belief and will spontaneously perform their moral belief and standard” (p. 108). Further, they stated:

Formation of moral belief originates from habit and is usually hard to be formed within a short period of time. Yet, once moral belief is formed, it will provide everlasting and stable spiritual motive for people’s choice of moral behavior and become a stable and strong moral personality. (p. 107)

Additionally, Li and Xiong felt as though people that possess these internal traits will often exhibit feelings of shame or remorse, eliminating the need for punishment. This view confirms that children must be immersed in the training of moral beliefs throughout their school day and within community activities in order to assure that views and actions surrounding appropriate character traits are embedded into their normal thought processes. Strain (2005) stated, “Active learning efforts, such as service-learning, provide spaces for students to introspectively reflect on their developing values, convictions, and actions that contribute to the lifelong process of developing character (as cited in Scott, 2012, p. 33).

**Biblical Perspective**

There are multitudes of scripture in the *Holy Bible* that serve as a guide for humans during their earthly life. Solomon is believed to have been the author of much of the book of Proverbs. It provides standards for learning wisdom and insight. Proverbs 22:6 speaks directly to adults concerning the moral and character education of children. This verse states, “Train up a
child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” The Matthew Henry Commentary explains that adults are to nurture children as they grow so that the knowledge of right/wrong, good/evil, virtuous acts/sinful acts, and the love of God will not die with the adults, but will be carried on in the lives of future generations (Henry, 1706). Henry (1706) further makes it clear that children will sometimes stray from the right path, but God expects parents to have trained the children so that if they do depart, they will likely return.

In Kingdom Education: God’s Plan for Educating Future Generations, Schultz (1998) argued that “When the Bible is removed from the classroom, kingdom education cannot take place. Unfortunately, this has already happened in most state-run schools all around the world” (p. 121). He also stated that beliefs and values cannot be separated from any area of knowledge. This means that parents must be pro-active in reinforcing Christian morals and values within the home environment. After all, God created parents to be a child’s first and most important teacher.

Though dated, Rodden’s (1997) address to the Interdisciplinary Symposium indicated an aspect of character education involving forgiveness that should be addressed. Rodden proposed that the single quality that educators need to teach is forgiveness. He stated,

While there are many facets and aspects to educational reform that may contribute to halting the rising tides of violence in our immediate families and in the international family, I want to propose that one dimension that is too seldom discussed systematically: forgiveness. (p. 712)

Similarly, Lin, Enright, and Klatt (2011) were advocates of a program that they referred to as forgiveness education. “These forgiveness programs emphasize virtuous behavior and moral
decision making” (Lin et al., 2011, p. 238). Lin et al. (2011) further stated that “As a person forgives, he or she must cultivate virtues such as compassion, generosity and love. When a person forgives, he or she considers how to respond to an instance of unfair treatment” (p. 241). Forgiveness programs fit within the broad terminology described by the CEP (2011). According to Lin et al. (2011), “Structured curricula can be used to teach youth forgiveness concepts and give them opportunities to practice the virtues underlying the development of forgiveness” (p. 239). Thus, forgiveness education has been widely supported by researchers within the context of character education.

In the Gospel of Mark 1:25, Jesus said, “And whenever you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone, so that your father also in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.” Noted researcher Jean Piaget (1932) also acknowledged forgiveness within the context of his study on child morality (as cited in Andrews, 2000). Further, Enright, Santos, and Al-Mabuk (1989), Enright, Gassin, and Wu (1992) and Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1991; 1994) proposed a model of forgiveness progression from which they believe people progress in hierarchal stages (as cited in Andrews, 2000). Specifically, Enright et al. (1992) assert that at the most advanced stage of forgiveness, individuals are able to forgive regardless of the context in which forgiveness is needed because this type of forgiveness “promotes a true sense of love” (p. 105, as cited in Andrews, 2000, p.77). Further, Rodden (1997) explained that forgiveness is a necessary component of character education that must be taught in order to “nurture a society in which there is hope to live mutually respectful lives” (p. 713). Additionally, Andrews (2002) proposed that forgiveness must involve a “change of heart by both offended and offender” (p. 83).
The Bible also contains many instances of forgiveness. Throughout his time on earth, Jesus often spoke of forgiveness. For instance, in Genesis, when Jacob deceived his father, Isaac, and stole Esau’s birthright, he was freely forgiven upon his return home (Genesis 33:4, 11, New King James Version). Likewise, Joseph forgave his brothers for selling him into slavery when he revealed himself to them during their visit to Egypt (Genesis: 45:5-15, 50:19-21). The most important example of forgiveness was shown as Christ hung dying on the cross. “Father forgive them for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). Thus, the Bible overall indicates that forgiveness is an important quality for individuals to have.

Also in support of forgiveness education, Lin et al. (2011) stated,

The research on school-based forgiveness programmes represents an important step toward considering forgiveness programmes as a form of character education. These studies demonstrate that forgiveness can be taught to youth in a school setting and that doing so has positive effects on psychological health, delinquent behavior, interpersonal relationships and academic performance. Forgiveness is not only defined in moral terms, but also promotes elements of character development. (p. 242)

Therefore, empirical research has overall indicated that forgiveness is a beneficial quality for individuals to develop.

**Teacher Efficacy**

Research has been conducted regarding a sense of efficacy among educators, but very little has been conducted concerning the area of character education. “Teacher efficacy is the teacher’s belief in his or her capability to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific task in a particular context” (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998, p. 49)
Early teacher training programs focused on preparing teachers to educate children in the basics of reading, mathematics, and the Bible. However, “Teacher education has evolved considerably over the past two centuries, and this earlier moral vision has gradually been diffused by a more multi-faceted, issues-driven agenda” (Jones, Ryan, & Bohlin, 1998, p. 12).

Jones et al. (1998) conducted a study on teacher preparedness in relation to fostering good character in students. Their “starting hypothesis was that character education is currently an under-addressed topic in the curriculum of teacher education vis-à-vis other concerns” (para. 5). They recognized that “character education” is the most widely used terminology within the educational system, but that this term also encompasses terms such as morals, values, and ethics. To further clarify their subject, they noted, “These terms tend to be associated with differing conceptions of character education and often are integrated with other related themes in education such as: multiculturalism, cooperative learning, conflict resolution, health education, civic education, etc” (p. 13). Therefore, they used the term “character education” in its broadest sense to include all approaches in their 1998 research.

Jones et al.’s (1998) findings indicated that school leaders continue to agree that character education is a necessary component of the American school. One participant stated:

Character education is a topic which concerns me deeply. Teacher must be able to model those character qualities which students need to develop. The survival of civilization depends upon individual citizens choosing to exhibit character qualities which take into consideration the values of others. (p. 15)

Despite this agreement among leaders, Jones et al. did not find character education to be a high priority among teacher preparation curriculums. Survey results showed that only 39.7 percent of
public institutions included character education in their written missions, compared with 73.1 percent of private institutions (Jones et al., 1998, p. 18).

Milson and Mehlig (2002) also conducted a study on teachers’ sense of efficacy concerning character education. During the study, they found that educators supported the teaching of character education. However, they found that educators generally felt that teacher education programs never addressed the subject. As previously stated, exceptions to this norm were primarily institutions with a religious affiliation (Milson & Mehlig, 2002). Jones et al. (1998) found that private, religiously affiliated universities are almost twice as likely as public institutions to report having a community service program that explicitly incorporates character education themes. In their study, Milson and Mehlig (2002) developed The Character Education Efficacy Belief Instrument (CEEBI). It was used to sample 254 elementary school teachers in a large Midwestern suburban school district. Overall, they discovered that teachers surveyed felt capable of teaching character education, but few felt prepared.

Lickona (1993) observed,

Character education is far more complex than teaching math or reading; it requires personal growth as well as skills development. Yet teachers typically receive almost no pre-service or in-service training in the moral aspects of their craft. Many teachers do not feel comfortable or competent in the values domain. (p. 11)

Additionally, Beachum, McCray, Yawn, and Obiakor (2013) conducted a study of pre-service teacher efficacy perceptions surrounding character education. Their study included 263 pre-service teachers. They defined pre-service teachers as students enrolled in a teacher education program that have not yet met the requirements to become licensed but are enrolled in the final
course before student teaching. Survey results indicated that participants felt character education should be included as part of a methods course within the teacher preparation curriculum (Beachum et al., 2013). These findings parallel the results of Milson (1999) which involved social studies teachers. “While pre-service teachers and social studies teachers both feel that character education is important enough to be included in a curriculum/methods course, the actual integration of character education into contemporary programs is rare” (Beachum et al., 2013, p. 478).

Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) observed, “Highly efficacious teachers are more enthusiastic about meeting the needs of their students. Therefore, it is important to enhance prospective teachers’ efficacy beliefs during their own educational programmes” (as cited in Boz & Boz, 2010, p. 279). Further, Jordan, Metha, and Webb (2000) noted that historically, the teaching of ethics and morals were an important aspect of teacher preparation studies (as cited in Beachum et al., 2013, p. 473). However, McClellan (1999) stated, “Teachers receive almost no training in moral education from the nation’s education schools” (p. 106). These observations are disturbing because researchers such as McDonnell (1999) have noted, “Character education is one of the most important, if not the most important, answer to our national crisis of character and is absolutely essential to any truly effective reform movement” (p. 251). Milson (1999) agreed, stating, “Teacher education programs are not currently training teachers adequately to function as character educators” (p. 44). Milson had the correct idea when stating:

Further research into the nature and effectiveness of programs that exist in private, religiously affiliated institutions may provide a model for the development of character education teacher training in other institutions. (p. 52)
Summary

Experts such as John Dewey (1915) have stressed the importance of character education. Dewey (1915) asserted that schools are similar to miniature societies, and that the quality of life learned within the school setting will be reflected in the character of the children that attend. Additionally, Benninga et al. (2006) emphasized, “The purpose of public schooling requires that schools seek to improve both academic and character education” (p. 449). Although research has indicated much interest in character education, the question remains regarding whose place it is to foster moral and character development among the nation’s youth. As stated previously, many parents feel that educators should be responsible for instilling moral and character development in their children (Van Brummelen, 2002). On the other hand, most educators feel that they should focus on academia alone (Shields, 2011). Other groups prefer to allow the children to progress at their own pace through Kohlberg’s stages of development (Brimi, 2009). No matter the position one takes, the general consensus remains that the development of moral adults is crucial for a nation to prosper. As Sanchez (2004) asserted, “We cannot expect our students to develop good character through wishful thinking or the hope that someone else will do it (though if we foolishly rely on the latter, the media will continue to step forward as the most influential institution)” (p. 109).
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

When Brannon (2008) interviewed national board certified teachers across the state of Illinois, he found that teachers surveyed were in favor of teaching character education. Brannon (2008) stated, “They agree: character education is important; teaching character is as important as academics for young children; and, they enjoy helping to shape children’s character through their teaching” (p. 63).

Having been an educator for twenty-five years, I have never been asked if I want to teach a particular curriculum, or how I feel about teaching a particular curriculum. My personal experience has been that curriculums are often decided upon by the higher powers of a school district and then put into the hands of teachers to be delivered. Hence, I focused on first grade teachers’ perceptions of teaching character education in a chosen school for my research. The purpose was to understand how educators on the delivery level really perceive their role in promoting character among their students.

This chapter will provide an overview of the research design, research questions, participants, school demographics, and procedures that were followed throughout the study. In addition, my personal biography, an overview of data collection, and an overview of data analysis will be addressed. Trustworthiness and ethical considerations will complete the chapter.

Research Design

I utilized a phenomenological approach of qualitative design for my study. A phenomenological design allowed me to explore experiences as described by the participants. Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) stated,
Quantitative measures typically contribute to our understanding with a snapshot of the
efficacy beliefs of a large number of teachers at a particular point in time. However,
qualitative studies of teacher efficacy are overwhelmingly neglected. Interviews and
observational data can provide a thick, rich description of the growth of teacher efficacy.
(p. 242)
Thus, my approach was transcendental, as I bracketed out my own experiences and gathered data
from persons that have experienced the phenomenon. I sought to identify “essences” (Creswell,
2007) that exist among first grade teachers using a character education program. Finding an
essence or identifying a theme involves finding commonalities within the data gathered from the
participants. This may involve similar statements, word choices, descriptions, or actions.
Recording experiences to this extent required me to analyze all written or verbal responses word
by word to find the common themes. This type of design was effective because I was required to
set aside my own judgment and “to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way
to perceiving things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33).

Moustakas (1994) provided this definition of qualitative research:
The empirical phenomenological approach involves a return to experience in order to
obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural
analysis that portrays the essences of the experience. The aim is to determine what an
experience means for the person who have had the experience and are able to provide a
comprehensive description of it. (p. 13)
Because I have strong personal feelings regarding character education, Creswell (2007),
suggested using Moustakas’s transcendental approach as a method of setting aside my own
thoughts and feelings. Bracketing, or epoché, a term coined by Husserl, allowed me to record my own experiences and then set them aside so that a new perspective might emerge (Wall, Glenn, Mitchinson, & Poole, 2004). According to Moustakas (1994), penning my own understandings, judgments, and knowledge of the experience was a necessary first step in the research process so that I could later revisit the data with fresh eyes in order to understand the experience from another point of view.

**Research Questions**

Creswell (2007) asserted, “Qualitative research questions are open-ended, evolving, and nondirectional” (p. 108). Creswell went on to explain that he preferred for researchers to pose one central question and then add additional sub questions.

This research was centered on three questions that were explored through a phenomenological research design. It was my desire to understand the essence surrounding the teaching of character education as experienced by the participants. Moustakas (1994) stated: “Phenomenology is rooted in questions that give a direction and focus to meaning, and in themes that sustain an inquiry, awaken further interest and concern, and account for our passionate involvement with whatever is being experienced (p. 59).

**Research Question One**

How do first grade teachers perceive their teaching of character education?

Question one was developed with respect to participants’ self-efficacy regarding character education. Lickona (1993) explained:

Character education is far more complex than teaching math or reading; it requires personal growth as well as skills development. Yet teachers typically receive almost no
preservice or inservice training in the moral aspect of their craft. Many teachers do not feel comfortable or competent in the values domain. (p. 11)

Further, Jones et al. (1998) asserted, “Little scholarly attention has been given to what is currently being done at the level of teacher preparation to equip future teachers with the skills and knowledge they need to work effectively as ‘character educators’” (p. 11).

**Research Question Two**

How do first grade teachers describe the impact that a character education program has on students?

For question two, I sought to understand participants’ views on the effects that a character education program has on students. This question was not intended to focus on academic effects, as studies already exist around this aspect of character education. Rather, this question was derived in order to investigate whether teachers feel that mutual respect among students is more evident because of character education implementation.

**Research Question Three**

How do first grade teachers perceive and describe the influence that their personal beliefs have on the teaching of character education?

For question three, I hoped to investigate the influence of educators’ personal beliefs on lesson presentation. Educators within a public school are not hired based on their religious beliefs. Thus, the intent of this question was also not to debate an educator’s belief, but rather to understand if their personal beliefs affect the way they present lessons on character.
Participants

All first grade teachers in a North Georgia school were targeted for this study. They each participated in the implementation of Sean Covey’s (2008) *The 7 Habits of Happy Kids* character education program. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) stated, “Theory-based or operational construct sampling is used when the purpose of the study is to gain understanding of real-world manifestations of theoretical constructs” (p. 183). Thus, I incorporated theory-based or operational construct sampling within my study. I sought buy-in from the administrative staff who in turn discussed the positives of participation with teachers. There were a total of nine first grade teachers at the chosen school during the time of my research. I was able to survey seven teachers, evaluate two teachers’ lesson plans, and conduct interviews with four teachers. All participants providing lesson plans and interviews were asked to sign consent forms (see Appendix A). The four teachers that agreed to participate in face-to-face interviews were asked to provide a suitable time to meet with me.

Setting

The elementary school is located in a large, suburban North Georgia community. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the school served 1,338 students, 82.60 staff members and three administrators at the time of this study (2012). The number of staff members included part time staff based upon a points system used to assign the number of instructors the principal may hire. This system indicates why there is a fraction of an employee included in the number of employees. The school had a student/teacher ratio of 16.20 during this study. 55.75% of students at the school were white, 20.10% were black, 15.40% were Hispanic, 4.26% were two or more races, 4.04%
were Asian/Pacific Islanders, and only 0.45% were American Indian/Alaskan (NCES, 2012). 52.09% of the students were male and 47.91% were female (NCES, 2012). 31.24% of students at this school were eligible for free lunch (NCES, 2012).

This school was chosen because educators at this school were implementing Sean Covey’s (2008) guidelines from The 7 Habits of Happy Kids school-wide as a character education curriculum. The administration at this school has included the material in morning announcements, the counselor has taught it directly during sessions in each classroom, and the teachers have reinforced and embedded the topics within their curriculum. Character education topics and content standards are included at the county-wide level in what the system labels as their Academic Knowledge and Content Standards (AKS). Marshall and Rossman (2006) discussed four aspects of sampling: events, settings, actors, and artifacts (as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 126). I expected that this particular school setting would indicate all four aspects. At this school, events occurred through the administration’s involvement, the counselor’s direct teaching, and the teachers’ embedded lessons. The setting provided all of these aspects in one central location. The participants were my former colleagues. Thus, rapport was already established. I feel that this established connection helped open the door to honest dialogue with the participants. Finally, artifacts were supplied through teacher lesson plan documents that were developed using the AKS standards.

Procedures

I first prepared a proposal and submitted to the Liberty Institutional Review Board for approval of the study. With IRB approval (see Appendix B), I discussed the study with administrators at the target school to gain approval to proceed. Potential participants attended an
informational meeting to hear my desires and my study’s implications. Contact prior to the start of the study was important because

   A precontact is an initial message in which the researchers identify themselves, discuss the purpose of the study, and request cooperation. Precontacts probably are effective because they alert respondents to the imminent arrival of the questionnaire, thus reducing the chance that it will be thrown out as junk mail. Precontacts also put a more personal, human face on the research study. (Gall et al., 2007, p. 237)

At the conclusion of the meeting, I distributed my original questionnaires in order to identify willing participants (see Appendix C). The questionnaires were used solely by the potential participants to complete self-examinations. This step was taken to assure that participants understood what the study entailed and what their roles would require. I did not collect the questionnaires. After the questionnaire distribution, I discussed the data collection procedures at length. I assured participants of their confidentiality through the use of coding and provided them with consent forms. If they desired to become a part of the study, the targeted participants were asked to fill out and return the consent forms in the provided addressed envelopes. Because the online survey and lesson plans were to remain anonymous, return of consent forms for these segments was not necessary. However, teachers that agreed to participate in the interview portion of the study were asked to sign and return the consent form.

   I distributed a survey developed based on an existing adaptation from Gall et al. (2007; see Appendix D). Volunteer colleagues reviewed the survey for clarity of questions and wording. Teachers that agreed to participate were directed to an online website where the survey could be completed at their own discretion. The group indicated that they preferred an online
method which could be completed at any time and which assured them of anonymity. Participants were reminded that no identifying information of themselves or their students would be included at any time throughout the study.

During this waiting period, I attempted to set aside my own biases surrounding character education by bracketing out my own thoughts. According to Husserl (1977), “The value of the epoche principle is that it inspires one to examine biases and enhances one’s openness even if a perfect and pure state is not achieved” (as cited in Moustakas, 1994, p. 61).

Upon receipt of the consent forms, I coordinated with participants to receive a copy of each teacher’s lesson plans for an entire month. Again, they were reminded to remove any identifying names or remarks. Two of nine teachers agreed to participate in this portion of the data collection. Upon receipt of the plans, I made sure that any identification had been removed. Within the plans, I looked for the frequency of character education lessons and for the amount of detail included within each lesson. Lesson plans were evaluated to find common words, procedures, and themes.

The next step involved personal interviews with each participant. Four of the targeted subjects agreed to engage in these sessions. These had to be coordinated on a personal basis with each teacher. All interviews were conducted at the close of the school day after the students had been dismissed. I planned to spend at least one hour per interview. However, each interview only lasted approximately twenty minutes. I informed participants of the necessity to digitally record the session, and I assured them again of our confidentiality agreement. To assure accuracy, I secured a professional transcriptionist to transliterate the conversations.
Personal Biography

I am a Pre-K teacher at a career high school. I am the oldest of three children. My mother was a high school biology teacher. My father attended the local junior college, but was not successful in his pursuit of a degree. My brother is a school counselor, and my sister is a school media specialist. As a young wife and college student, I taught in the preschool department at a small Christian school. While there, my own faith grew and my knowledge of the Bible increased. I strived to be the model that I felt my students needed. When the school closed, I went to work in the public school system. I continued to strive to be a Christian model for my students. However, my hands had become somewhat tied because of the inability to share my faith freely within the classroom. I have witnessed years that character education was included as a part of the curriculum as well as years that character education was not included. My preference is to include some type of character and/or moral education program within a school curriculum. With the appearance of moral decline in the society today, I feel that studying the impact of character education on the school environment is important for curriculum planners.

Data Collection

I used three types of instruments, also known as triangulation, to gather data (Gall et al., 2007). Gall et al. (2007) asserted that researchers should “vary the methods used to generate findings and see if they are corroborated across these variants” (p. 474). Using multiple data sources for a study also confirms the credibility and reliability. The first instrument I used was a survey. The second area of data was collected from each teacher’s lesson plan booklets. The third instrument included interviews. Gall et al. (2007) also stated, “Questionnaires and
interviews are used extensively in educational research to collect data about phenomena that are not directly observable: inner experience, opinions, values, interests, and the like” (p. 228). An overview of each data collection method follows.

**Questionnaire**

At the conclusion of the information meeting, I distributed questionnaires that once again clarified what was required of participants (See Appendix C). The yes-and-no format allowed each potential participant an opportunity to self-reflect on the involvement required if they choose to be a part of the study. I remained in the room at a distance in order to answer any questions or concerns that the targeted audience may have had.

Glesne and Webb (1993) advised researchers to gather information from possible participants about their training and teaching experience as a first step. They interviewed several researchers and found through their feedback that the participants felt their questions were interesting and relevant. However, they were concerned with the time it would take to complete such an in-depth survey. After discovering this finding, I created a closed-form format. I incorporated this step in an effort to assure better participation of the written surveys.

**Surveys**

I distributed written surveys to all first grade teachers for them to complete on a voluntary basis (see Appendix D) through an online survey website named Survey Monkey. This site allowed me to compose survey questions and answers tailored to my interests. The format required each participant to read 16 statements, reflect on their thoughts, and choose an answer along the given scale. Gall et al. (2007) provided an adapted version of designing questionnaires from Berdie, Anderson, and Niebuhr’s (1986) *Questionnaires: Design and Use*. I developed my
survey based on the 21 points provided in Gall et al.’s (2007) adaptation. The survey was designed in a closed form. Because this study surrounded teacher perceptions, an “Attitude Scale” was used. Gall et al. (2007) stated, “An attitude scale can be defined as an individual’s viewpoint or disposition toward a particular ‘object’ (a person, a thing, an idea, etc.)” (p. 220). I incorporated a Likert scale format into the survey so that participants could rate their extent of agreement with each item. The use of this format provided me with pre-specified responses and increased the completion rate of the participants due to the minimal effort required. A “no opinion” option was included to curb random answers if the participant did not feel knowledgeable enough to choose a rating. Because I also provided the survey online, the participants were more likely to participate in an open discussion during individual interview sessions. Overall, the surveys provided me with a basic idea of the topics my participants appear to view as most significant. Although the interview questions had already been prepared, the survey answers were a potential avenue for me to re-evaluate or elaborate on different areas. Participants were reminded that no personal identification would be included on the survey to maintain data integrity. Survey results were obtained through the Survey Monkey website with no tracking of participants. With this online survey method, I avoided any chance of identity violations.

Traditionally, surveys are linked to quantitative research, which measures numerical distributions of variables. However, the desired outcome of this survey was not to achieve a set number of agrees or disagrees. Rather, the desired outcome was to influence each participant to reflect upon the phenomenon being studied. Jansen (2010) stated, “While the statistical survey
analyses frequencies in member characteristics within a population, the qualitative survey analyses frequencies in member characteristics in a population.”

**Lesson Plans**

Lesson plans from an entire month were collected from two participants (see Appendix E). I conducted content analysis involving the use of a category-coding procedure. Using the examples given by Gall et al. (2007), I developed categories for instruction objectives, instructional components, and key terms as related to character education. Gall et al. (2007) advised, “After initial development of the content classification system, you should determine whether several raters can use it with a high degree of consistency” (p. 289). Thus, I developed scoring rules to insure reliability. I computed frequency counts in order to categorize meaningful text.

The school in my study incorporated the use of Sean Covey’s book entitled *The 7 Habits of Happy Kids* (2008) as a guide for their character education curriculum. I evaluated the use of key objectives, instructional strategies, and terms from the curriculum throughout the lesson plans. Common themes and recurring language were noted throughout the participants’ plans. These were included in the frequency counts for meaningful text. The evaluation of documents within a qualitative study was subject to my interpretation. According to Gall et al. (2007), “In qualitative research, the analysis procedure is likely to be emergent” (p. 292). This is why the use of a scoring system was established early in the document evaluation process.

**Interviews**

Each participating teacher was offered the chance to be interviewed. I created the interview questions to indicate insight into their involvement in the current character education
program (see Appendix F). Surveys distributed and collected earlier had potential to provide
answers to interview questions. Survey answers also had potential to create additional areas of
interest. Thus, the interview questions were evaluated, deleted, or expanded upon based on
survey answers. I explained the steps that would be taken to protect participants’ identities in
hopes of encouraging participation. Overall, the purpose of the interviews was to gather
thoughts and feelings on teaching character education. The interviews provided an opportunity
for me to delve deeper into teacher views and gather examples as they arise within the
conversation. Participants were asked to sign consent forms before beginning the interviews (see
Appendix F). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to assure accuracy.
Interviews were planned to last at least one hour, but were able to proceed until no new themes
emerged. Gall et al. (2007) stated,

The major advantage of interviews is their adaptability. Skilled interviewers make an
effort to build trust and rapport with respondents, thus making it possible to obtain
information that the individual probably would not reveal by any other data-collection
method. They also can follow up a respondent’s answers to obtain more information and
clarify vague statements. (p. 228)

Therefore, as I began reviewing the transcriptions, any areas that needed further clarification
were noted so that follow up questions could be addressed via telephone or e-mail with each
participant.

Data Analysis

In the book Phenomenological Research Methods, Moustakas (1994) offered his
modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis of phenomenological data.
The steps that are outlined were the procedures followed for this study. Creswell (2007) recommended using “Moustakas’s (1994) approach because it has systematic steps in the data analysis procedure and guidelines for assembling the textual and structural descriptions” (p. 60). Thus, I analyzed data using this approach.

**Epoching**

The first step of Moustakas’ approach required me to epoche (or bracket) a full description of my personal experiences as they related to the phenomenon. Epoching is a term that was coined by Husserl and embraced by Moustakas. Moustakas (1994) described epoching as “a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (p. 33). Creswell (2007) asserted that this bracketing “is an attempt to set aside the researcher’s personal experiences so that the focus can be directed to the participants in the study” (p. 235). I feel that epoching was an important step that prevented bias. This process further allowed for a complete self-examination of my own perspective concerning the teaching of character education. With the temptation of bias now set aside, I could proceed to data analysis.

**Survey Results**

Results from the online survey were examined. Survey Monkey provided software that calculated percentages based on participants’ chosen answers. I looked at each question independently and then grouped the questions into similar themes. Grouping the questions by similarities provided a way to organize and reduce the large amount of data that was collected. Generalizations from these results were noted to be compared with other data from the triangulation.
Interviews

After all interviews were conducted, the recordings were sent to a transcriptionist. Upon receipt of the printed text, I read through the transcripts multiple times to attain a feel for them. Each sentence was read repeatedly and carefully evaluated for descriptive language that targeted the phenomenon. Statements that appeared significant were extracted from the transcripts and set aside for comparison between participants.

After all transcripts were carefully read and pertinent statements recorded, a variety of colored highlighters were used to mark certain phrases, thoughts, or words so that each would stand out and could easily be grouped. Moustakas (1994) suggested creating a list of each “nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement” as a way of extraditing the meaningful units of the experience (p. 122). Moustakas (1994) labeled this procedure as horizontalization. The significant statements were then grouped into themes or clusters with similar meanings. Groupings guided me in writing textural descriptions, describing what the participants experienced. A structural description was also written to tell how each experience occurred. Verbatim examples from the interviews were included. The final step involved me revisiting my own experience of the phenomenon to identify the “essence” of my thoughts. Specifically, I wrote a textural-structural description of my experiences. This step allowed me to elaborate on what the participants experienced through the phenomenon and further how they went through the experience. Each of the above steps was completed with all participant transcripts.

The final step involved the compilation of all participants’ experiences. Moustakas’ (1994) method required that the composite integrate all textural-structural descriptions of the
meanings and essences of the experience. Finally, I formed a universal description that represented the entire group.

**Trustworthiness**

Dependability and credibility were acquired using triangulation to corroborate evidence of a common theme or perspective. I formed a peer review team comprised of a principal and a curriculum consultant. They were used to debrief and provide harsh critiquing to inquire about the methods, meanings and interpretations. The peers “[kept] the researcher honest by asking hard questions about methods, meanings and interpretations” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). Rich, thick language descriptions provided details of the study. This allowed the reader to transfer information to other similar studies. An external auditor that is removed from the research examined the process and product in an effort to assess for accuracy.

**Ethical Considerations**

The ethical considerations of this study relied on me maintaining the confidentiality of participants. I provided confidentiality agreements to teachers and parents participating in the interviews. I agreed to protect information given during interviews by using coding methods in place of names on transcripts. Written survey participants were directed not to include a name or grade level on the survey. This anonymity increased the likelihood of participation. All recorded and written documentation remained in my possession at all times. I own a home safe that requires both a key and a combination lock for access. The documentation will remain in the safe for the required length of time, and will be destroyed at the conclusion of the follow up period required by the university.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to examine the perceptions of first grade teachers currently implementing a character education program. According to Moustakas (1994), “It is considered ‘transcendental’ because it adheres to what can be discovered through reflection on subjective acts and their objective correlates” (p. 45). I set aside my preconceived thoughts surrounding character education and experienced the essences of this study through the eyes of the participants.

Data was collected over a three week period from first grade teachers at the targeted school. Gall et al. (2007) suggested that gathering data through multiple sources assures that the information obtained corroborates across varying methods. Thus, data was collected using a triangulation method in order to satisfy this suggestion. Methods of collection included an online survey, lesson plan evaluations, and face-to-face interviews. Participants were allowed to choose their level of participation. Therefore, some participated in just one area while others chose involvement with two or three parts.

As stated previously, Moustakas (1994) suggested a modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method as a way of organizing and analyzing data. This method required the data to be analyzed first for significant statements and then for experiences surrounding the topic. Extracting these commonalities continually reduced the data into clusters with similar themes. Each theme was analyzed in order to report a textural description of the experience in written form. Gall et al. (2007) contended, “A textural description is an account of an individual’s intuitive, prereflective perceptions of a phenomenon from every angle” (p. 496). Data was then
analyzed to report, through a structural description, how the phenomenon was experienced. Data acquired from each participant was then synthesized in order to identify the essence.

The purpose of this chapter is to present the data analysis. Offered within this chapter are my own bracketed experiences (epoche), a reporting of the survey results, an analysis of lesson plans shared by two participants, and commonalities extracted from face-to-face interviews.

**The Epoche Process**

Creswell (2007) stated, “To fully describe how participants view the phenomenon, researchers must bracket out, as much as possible, their own experiences” (p. 61). Further, Moustakas (1994) explained, “Epoche requires a new way of looking at things, a way that requires that we learn *to see* what stands before our eyes, what we can distinguish and describe” (p. 33). This initial step of the research process proved to be quite difficult for me. I feared that completely setting aside my thoughts in order to view gathered data with fresh eyes would require years of practice. Moustakas (1994) used the word “transparent” when describing the feeling associated with bracketing out one’s own thoughts. Though difficult, he stated:

One’s whole life of thinking, valuing, and experiencing flows on, but what captures us in any moment and has validity for us is simply what is there before us as a compelling thing, viewed in an entirely new way. The challenge of the Epoche is to be transparent to ourselves, to allow whatever is before us in consciousness to disclose itself so that we may see with new eyes in a naïve and completely open manner. (p. 86)

The terms “character” and “education” are not always used simultaneously. Therefore, I have evaluated both of these terms in depth separately as well as together. Here, I have
presented my perceptions of them both, separately and together, in order to clear my mind of preconceived notions.

Character

I am generally a happy person. Thus, when I first look at the word “character,” I often have memories of cartoon characters. I have often used the phrase, “you are such a character” when describing someone that is funny, witty, or entertaining. However, as I truly pondered this description, I realized that this word does not just describe a person. This term goes much deeper than that. Character is not a word that I recalled reading within my King James Bible. However, I believe that much of my perception of this word is grounded in my study of God’s word. As a human, my tendency is to dissect the huge variety of qualities a person possesses in order to judge their character. When contemplating this approach, my Christian conscious immediately reminded me of God’s commandment against judging others. Thus, the word “judge” likely was not the correct way of looking at others, as this word gave a false idea that my perceptions of good character were the only right ones. A better process was to simply evaluate the many facets of a person through their choice of words and actions toward others. In other words, evaluating what is referred to as the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule can be stated in various ways, but overall indicates that individuals should treat others the way that they would like to be treated.

There is no way I could put pen to paper and describe all the qualities a person of great character might possess. Words such as kind, helpful, honest, and truthful came to mind. Thus, I turned once again to God’s word for insight, because I find that it can often put my thoughts into words better than I. When human beings adhere to the word of God, I believe that their words
and actions toward others show that they are also aspiring to be a person of great, Godly character.

**Education**

Education is what I do. I have spent most of my waking hours trying to teach children information that will help them grow into knowledgeable adults. For me, knowledge goes way beyond the regurgitating of facts and figures. Teaching four year olds, I have continually been reminded that I must serve as a facilitator of everything I want them to learn. Whether it is paper/pencil tasks, manipulation of objects such as blocks, or exploring letters and numbers, my students have looked to me for guidance. Education means sparking a desire within students to explore and understand the world around us. My Pre-K students have been like sponges desiring to draw in as much information as I have been able to dish out. Each teacher’s job is to help his or her students understand, retain, and build upon presented material.

**Character Education**

Combining the words character and education drew my attention back to the traits I identified when looking at an isolated description of character. My first thought was to describe character education as the teaching of traits that mankind considers desirable. However, I then wondered who decides which traits are desirable. I thought back to the literature that I reviewed for this research, and recalled our founding fathers’ desires to establish a country that was freed from bias, allowed freedom of worship, and treated all people with the dignity and respect that each person deserves. These are the basic traits that are highlighted within character education today.
Participant Summary

For this study, I targeted nine potential participants. Each participant completed an early childhood education plan of study through an accredited college/university. All were certified and licensed to teach through the state Professional Standards Commission. Participants’ completed degree levels ranged from bachelors to specialist. The level of teaching experience ranged from 15 to 25 years. A total of seven teachers agreed to participate in the research study. Seven completed the online survey, two submitted lesson plan data, and four engaged in personal interviews. The online survey participants did not require any type of coding to mask their identities since the answers were submitted anonymously via the web site. Of the two lesson plan participants, one remained anonymous because their plans were submitted without identification via the school courier system. However, the second set of lesson plans was handed to me just before an interview segment. I immediately checked for any signs of identification and found nothing. Pseudonyms were assigned to each interview participant for reporting purposes.

Interviews

Four participants agreed to individual interviews. Each interview was scheduled at a time convenient for each participant. The interviews were conducted within the individual teachers’ classrooms after all students were dismissed for the day. Though the interviews were relaxed in nature, eleven questions were prepared to insure the conversation remained on the topic of character education. I set aside an hour for each participant. However, the interviews only lasted an average of twenty minutes. Each participant was reminded that the interview would be audio recorded and transcribed.
Interview Analysis

This section will describe my initial impression of the participants. First, all participants were assigned a pseudonym. I noted personal thoughts on the interview participants as part of my own bracketing process. Moustakas (1994) stated,

Everything referring to others, their perceptions, preferences, judgments, feelings must be set aside in achieving the Epoche. I am more readily able to meet something or someone and to listen and hear whatever is being presented, without coloring the other’s communication with my own habits of thinking, feeling, and seeing, removing the usual way of labeling or judging, or comparing. I am ready to perceive and know a phenomenon from its appearance and presence. (p. 88-89)

After interviews were completed and transcribed, I began extracting significant statements following Moustakas’ modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of phenomenological data analysis. Each statement was considered for significance relating to the experience, and the relevant statements were recorded (see Appendix J). Moustakas (1994) referred to these statements as “invariant horizons” or “meaning units” of the experience. Thus, meaning units were then clustered into themes to be synthesized and reduced so that my personal descriptions might reflect the relationships between the experienced phenomena and the participants. The following analyses are solely my interpretations.

Research Question One

How do first grade teachers perceive their teaching of character education?

Christy. The first interviewee, Christy, gave the initial impression that her mind was on classroom tasks needing to be completed and also on family activities that occur after her school
day has ended. She explained that she tries to embed character traits throughout her daily conversation. Christy said, “I teach character education throughout, but I’ve never actually taught, per say, character education like...train through a curriculum.”

Joyce. Joyce did not appear to mind discussing her views on character education with me. She seemed comfortable. Joyce commented that she loves her class and that if given a choice, “this is a class [she would] move with.” She claims that character education was taught formally for a year in her school, but that nothing formal exists currently. Specifically, she stated: “We did formally teach it for a year, and like I said, I try to incorporate a lot of those things into my teaching, to my classroom, just daily life, but it isn’t anything formal.”

Tammy. Tammy expressed that she was not sure if the information she provided would be helpful to me. She explained that she has never received any training on teaching character education. When asked about the curriculum used, she commented that she was never given a book. She stated:

Last year we did have signs around the building and that did help me because I would actually see the sign and a picture to go with it because we didn’t receive books. The books were in the book room for checkout use, but they were mainly for the teachers that participated in the workshop. Only 15 teachers were allowed from our faculty to go, so that’s why I don’t feel like I do isolated lessons, because I don’t have access to the curriculum.

Kathy. Kathy had the impression that character education was a requirement of a teacher’s position, and that they were responsible for embedding it into weekly lessons. Specifically, she asserted:
I was actually very surprised that many teachers were not doing it, because like when I talked to you, I just assumed, but you know, we’re so far apart (the rooms are spread out) and when we have our meetings and it’s not collaboration. I was very, very, very surprised, but yeah, it is so tedious, this job, and it gets harder every, single year.

Research Question Two

*How do first grade teachers describe the impact that a character education program has on students?*

**Christy.** Christy, the first interviewee did not comment on the impact of character education among her students; however, she did not feel that she is really the one who teaches the subject. She stated:

We have counselors that do lessons on character traits, but we have not been trained on actually how to teach those lessons. Mine are just embedded by what the counselor introduces. Then, I just follow through and reinforce it or notice it throughout the day. That’s why we have counselors, and they do a phenomenal job, and they come in our classroom once-a-month, and they do very hands-on activities, and I think with the young learner, they’re able to grasp the concept through those month-to-month lessons, so that’s how most of the character education is taught throughout my classroom.

**Joyce.** Joyce provided the impression that the program had more of an impact on the students when the entire school was on board. She shared:

I did it more when they were doing it more as a school and every morning we also had, if that has been mentioned to you, they would have a character trait and they would discuss it on the morning announcements and sometimes the fifth-graders would do the
announcements. They would talk about it and sometimes have a little dialogue or they’d have kind of a skit that would demonstrate, but they don’t do that anymore either, I don’t think.

**Tammy.** Tammy appeared to have mixed feelings about the program. She only knows snippets about the program from office loud speaker announcements, and from what she overhears when the counselor comes to present a lesson in her classroom. She stated that she tries to embed character traits into her conversations with the students, especially when teaching social studies and famous Americans. She then gave an example:

In the social studies, when we’re talking about different characters there are some words like perseverance and some of the character qualities that those particular character had. And, then it’s a character that is 100 years old and they don’t have any reference point.

**Kathy.** Kathy felt strongly that some type of character education program, formal or informal, makes a great impact. She expressed her enthusiasm by stating:

I really do believe it should be a facet in the curriculum. Like I said, I think especially because we’re nurturing these kids and we are in essence responsible in a small part of their life to become valuable citizens down the road. I think it is just crucial to teach them right and wrong, what a good citizen is and what a bad citizen is. I do feel like if I can change any of these little children’s minds about something to be gentler with other kids or other people then you know.

**Research Question Three**

*How do first grade teachers perceive and describe the influence that their personal beliefs have on the teaching of character education?*
Christy. Christy gave an initial impression throughout the interview that she did not think she would shed any light on the subject of character education. She gave no indication that her beliefs and influence have made an impact on her integration of character traits throughout her daily conversation.

Joyce. Joyce explained that she uses a “classroom community” approach with her students, and does not reinforce the 7 Habits curriculum. Further, she explained:

When something happens that somebody is not happy, what I always have done is have them discuss it. I’ll maybe call a child over and say, ‘So and so is unhappy, do you know why?’ And, most of the time they do know why and then I will have them talk about it. If they don’t’ know why the child will say, ‘Oh, this is why I’m unhappy which you did thus and so,’ and then they talk about it. I feel like that is a real, good, positive way of dealing with it.

Joyce felt like rapport and discussion make a real, good, positive way of dealing with it. She expressed that she doesn’t use the terminology found in the “7 Habits” book.

Tammy. Tammy did not indicate any perceptions nor did she describe the influence that her personal beliefs have on the teaching of character education.

Kathy. As expressed earlier, Kathy is the most enthusiastic about the Covey curriculum. She felt that part of a teachers calling was to instill character traits and morals into their students. However, she was adamant that she felt her personal beliefs and her teaching position should be treated as two, separate entities. She doesn’t discuss her personal beliefs with the students.
Survey Analysis

The online survey was emailed to nine possible participants via Survey Monkey. The survey consisted of sixteen multiple choice questions (see Appendix D). As discussed in Chapter Three, this attitude scale used a Likert scale for answer choices. Participants chose among five possible answers: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, or No Opinion. Seven of the nine targeted teachers chose to complete the online survey. Survey data was essentially collected in order to compare closed-ended responses to open-ended verbal responses provided during the interviews. Through Survey Monkey, participants were able to submit their answers anonymously. Due to anonymity, online survey results could not be directly connected to interviewee responses. Since the survey presented only closed answer statements, the data gathered was somewhat limited. This type of data cannot provide rich, thick descriptions from individuals. Therefore, it was used as a means of ensuring validity among the three types of data collected. I felt that grouping the survey questions by similarities would create meaning units. These meaning units (horizon) were then used to extract broad generalizations for comparison to other data gathered. The survey analysis will be organized according to each of the three research questions. Within each section, I will report findings from the online survey results as they pertain to the research question discussed; therefore, the survey questions and their answers will not be presented in numerical order but instead will be grouped according to similarities.

Research Question One

How do first grade teachers perceive their teaching of character education?
The survey results showed a struggle to teach character education not because of the content necessarily, but because of the lack of a provided curriculum and training. Overall, the teachers felt that schools should include character education within educational curriculum if they are trained and prepared to do so.

Character Education in School Curriculum. Five of the seven teachers responded that character education is an important part of their curriculum, and six of seven teachers agreed that schools should include its teaching within the educational curriculum. Goswami and Garg (2011) explained that with growing globalization come numerous effects, many of which are adverse to society. They felt that schools were the perfect setting for teaching, modeling and nurturing universal values. They stated:

The Process of globalization has influence on every sphere of society including its basic values, ideals, living style, goals and ambitions. We constantly see in the news that character is set aside for the feeling of the moment. The time has come to bring character to the forefront again and raise the moral values we have as a society, and as individuals. This growing concern over the erosion of essential values and an increasing cynicism in the society has brought to the focus the need for readjustment in our educational system (p. 45).

Additionally, Brannon (2008) interviewed National Board Certified Teachers to gather their thoughts. They felt that society has often condoned unacceptable behaviors in the classroom which in turn confuses the children on what appropriate school behavior should be. They stated:

Children also are watching more television and being exposed to more adult-oriented material at a much younger age than in the past. This has resulted in children receiving
mixed messages about the value of good character and has reduced opportunities for early ‘community’ learning through social interactions. (p. 57)

**Responsibility and Enjoyment of Teaching Character.** Five out of seven participants agreed that they liked teaching character education and six out of seven indicated that they did not mind the responsibility of teaching character traits to their students. These survey results somewhat conflicted with the overall impression received from the interview sessions. Though all of the interview participants had no issue with teaching character traits, most were focused on student achievement as their primary goal. Howard, Berkowitz, and Schaeffer (2004) stated,

> The standards movement, with its emphasis on test scores as the primary means of accountability, has led to a narrowing of the curriculum to matters more easily measured in high-stakes examinations. This is not the most fertile environment for character education. Nevertheless, grappling with ethical issues and a fundamental concern with the social, moral, and emotional growth of students are part of the human condition and will not disappear with the advent of any new paradigm of schooling (p. 189).

Skaggs & Bodenhorn (2006) initiated a four year study to determine a relationship between implementing character education, student behavior, and student achievement. Five school districts were measured for outcomes. In relation to student achievement, the researchers found little impact. They speculated that perhaps no direct relationship existed between character education goals and student academic goals. These findings were not encouragement for teachers that were focused mainly on student test performance.

In contrast, the study by Benninga et al. (2006) discussed in chapter two of this paper found an encouraging link between character education and academics after four of six indicators
that they had isolated shown significant and positive correlations. The differences in these findings suggest that further study on the relationship of academics achievement and character education needs to be conducted; especially if educators are focused on achievement.

**Character Education at Home.** The majority of teachers (86 percent) agreed that character education should be taught at home. Dobson (1970) stated, “Respectful and responsible children result from families where the proper combination of love and discipline is present. Both these ingredients must be applied in the necessary quantities. An absence of either is often disastrous” (as cited in Anderson, 2000, p. 140). However, Anderson (2000) argued that in the “ideal world”, parents, teachers, and community members would all work together toward the common goal of raising children with positive character traits (p. 139). Additionally, Bulach (2002) noted, “Clearly there is a need in our society and in school settings to curb violence and to have citizens and students practice behaviors that are of a more civil and moral nature than currently is the pattern” (p. 79). He further recognized that the breakdown of the family unit and lack of moral training by the parents bear much of the blame for violence in society.

Howard et al. (2004) argued that some parents object to character education being taught within the school setting. They stated, “The arguments offered often include that schools are teaching values counter to those held by the families, and that the focus of schools should be limited to ‘core knowledge disciplines’” (p. 201). Though I will not go into the debate on the topic of church and state within this paper, this argument is often where schools and parents collide on what they think should and should not be presented in the educational setting. Goswami and Garg (2011) argued that the responsibility of raising children of good character resides with everyone. They stated,
Developing good character is first and foremost a parental responsibility but the task must also be shared with school and the broader community. It is very important that each school, community reach consensus on what values should be taught in a school in order to create the sense of ownership. Early in the planning process, schools should collaborate with parents and their communities to craft a shared vision and objectives. (p. 47)

During his administration, President George W. Bush (2002) stated,

Now, I know there’s a debate about values and character. I’ve heard it before- as you might remember, I was the governor of a great state at one time. I’ve heard every excuse why we shouldn’t teach character. It always starts with religion, as to why we shouldn’t teach character. Well, look, we should never promote a particular religion, I agree. That’s not the- that’s not the reason to have character education. But we’ve got to recognize in our society that strong values are shared by good people of different faiths, and good people who have no faith at all. (para. 16)

**Consideration of Teacher Opinions.** Five out of seven participants indicated that their opinion was not sought when the curriculum was chosen. Four participants implied that they were not given a choice on the implementation of a character program. As discussed during the interview portion, only one teacher was involved in the selection process. Bulach (2002) mentioned,

A feature leading to ineffectiveness in many character education programs is the assignment of responsibility for the program to a teacher or counselor. This person is given the responsibility to implement the program but does not have the power to make
faculty follow it. Consequently, many faculty members do little to promote character education. Unless the school leadership takes an active role, teachers will pay lip service to the character education program, but will not really support it (p. 81).

**Character Education Preparation.** Six teachers (83 percent) felt that the school system had not adequately prepared them to present the chosen curriculum however, four (57 percent) indicated they had support on the school level. Though not specifically stated in the survey questions, research revealed that often teachers are not schooled at the college on how to teach character education nor do they receive sufficient training through professional development within their hiring system. Recently, Beachum et al. (2013) reviewed the importance of pre-service teacher training in regards to character and moral education in their article titled, *Support and Importance of Character Education: Pre-Service Teacher Perceptions.* They recounted the history of teacher preparation programs and how morality and ethical emphasis was a large aspect of each program until the 1960’s and 1970’s when they say character education lost its prominence. According to them, character education has not been a part of most teacher education programs since.

Jones et al. (1998) had similar findings concerning teacher preparatory institution. Data gathered from deans and department chairs affirmed that character and morals should be included in teacher education programs, but only 24.4 percent stated that it was emphasized within their curriculum (p. 15). Their findings did indicate:

An overwhelming number (70.1 percent) said that character education is covered as a unit of at least one required course. This might suggest that relative to other topics which exist as a separate, required course, character education is addressed in a less focused and
substantive way. Although this study is far from conclusive or exhaustive, the data here suggests that there is a considerable gap between rhetoric and reality. (p. 16)

Ryan and Bohlin (1999) stated,

One of the stumbling blocks preventing schools from embracing character education is that few teachers have been prepared for this work. Although there are stirrings within the teacher education community to give character education greater prominence, the great majority of teachers are very unsure of what they can and should do as character educators. (pp. 152-153)

The online survey indicated some local school support. There is no way to know what type of support this might have been. Relating the interview findings in this area, the local support might be that of the counselors who presented more lessons on character education than the individual teachers, especially since it was previously noted that only one teacher participated in the curriculum workshop.

Local schools and school systems have often used professional development as a means of updating teachers on new curriculum or curriculum changes. Perhaps some of the participants felt that there needed to be professional development offered on character education before it was implemented at the school level. Varela (2012) pointed out what she felt were three major sins of professional development: not differentiated, not embedded in classroom practice, and not on-going. She suggested, “Administrators and directors of professional development need to look closely at classroom data to find patterns and to see teachers’ input concerning their needs” (p. 18). The second point made by Varela concerned embedded practice. Her thoughts surround imbedding and modeling the correct behaviors within the classroom. “Teachers need
professional development directly related to what they are presently doing, not to skills and
content already taught” says Varela. Her final argument concerned the continuation of
professional development. Her view stated that professional development cannot be a one day
fix all, it must be continually on going. She suggested that one way of addressing the issue was
to use common planning times as an extension of the professional development days.

**Inclusion of Character in Lesson Plans.** Overall, most participants (five out of seven)
did not present character lessons using focused lessons. Instead, they all indicated that the traits
are embedded within other areas of their lesson plans. Whether this was by teacher choice or
necessity could not be determined. The lack of focused lessons might be attributed to the
concern over academic performance. Since the teachers felt such pressure surrounding test
scores, they may have been purposefully choosing to inject character ideas within other subjects
as a time saving method. However, as previously discussed, none of the teachers received a
book or curriculum materials surrounding the *7 Habits of Happy Kids* book that the system had
chosen to incorporate. The absence of a curriculum guide, supplemental materials and training
might also have been reasons to avoid focused lessons. Goswami and Garg (2011) argued,
“Instructional materials, methods, and strategies, when developed into interdisciplinary
curricular themes, empower teachers to create meaning while allowing students time for
purposeful exploration and self-reflection” (p. 46). Bulach (2002) argued that curriculum guides
often repeat the same material from grade to grade causing students to become bored and
uninterested. He noted, “In order for “significant change to occur” the curriculum must be
infused throughout the entire school day” (p. 81). Bulach’s view resonated with comments
given during one of the interviews. One of the teachers mentioned that it was difficult to really
tell if the character lessons made a difference since the children began receiving the material in kindergarten; and it is the same focus book. Additionally, the majority of participants embed their traits through other subjects.

**Research Question Two**

*How do first grade teachers describe the impact that a character education program has on students?*

Much of the survey centered on general thoughts in relation to question two providing us with a description of the impact that a character education program has on students and the character education’s worth.

**Student Usefulness and Enjoyment.** Five out of seven survey participants agreed that the children enjoyed the character education lessons. Six felt teaching character traits were a worthy undertaking and that schools should include character education within the educational curriculum.

Bulach (2002) stated,

Implementing programs to improve student behaviors associated with character traits is a task well worth undertaking. If the character education program is successful, bullying behavior and incidents of violence should decrease because students will be more sympathetic, tolerant, kind, compassionate, and forgiving. With these improvements in student behavior and school culture, the result should be improved student achievement and test scores, as well. (pp. 81-82)

Revell (2002) found a differing opinion during a multi-year inquiry of students’ attitudes toward character education (as cited in Prestwich, 2004, p. 146). Comparing magnet and non-
magnet schools that used the exact curriculum, Revell found that students attending the non-
magnet school were more pessimistic of the program and the negative attitudes increased along
with the grade level. Revell explained,

Students in magnet schools tended to be offended that it was thought they needed to be
reminded to have these values, while students in non-magnet schools saw a conflict
between the character education message and the reality of the world around them. (as
cited in Prestwich, 2004, p. 146)

Revell’s findings should serve as further evidence that parents, educators and communities
should work together in the area of character development. Students of all ages will respond to
and embrace actions that they see modeled constantly. In 1948, Martin Luther King, Jr. stated,
“We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character- that is the goal
of true education” (cited in Goswami & Garg, 2011, p. 45).

Adams (2013) maintained, “Character education is once again gaining momentum as a
part of the comprehensive whole school reform movement” (p. 7). She acknowledged that some
advocates sense that the Common Core State Standards may help in the revival of character
education since students will need to place more emphasis on their studies. A principal
interviewed within her article stated, “We do have data that show attendance goes up, discipline
problems go down, achievement rises” (p. 7).

**Research Question Three**

*How do first grade teachers perceive and describe the influence that their personal
beliefs have on the teaching of character education?*
Within the survey, some teachers indicated that they struggled to separate their personal convictions from the chosen curriculum, while others stated they do not struggle to separate convictions from subject material. In a similar question, the participants indicated whether they had difficulty presenting lessons when the lessons show no association with their personal beliefs. Five disagreed/strongly disagreed, and two had no opinion. Also, some survey takers agreed that they were allowed to incorporate their own convictions/morals while teaching character education.

**Personal Beliefs.** Three survey questions centered on the personal beliefs of the participants and their comfort level in sharing these beliefs with students. Three teachers indicated that they struggled to separate their personal convictions from the chosen curriculum, while three other teachers indicated that they do not struggle to separate convictions from subject material. In a similar question, the participants indicated whether they had difficulty presenting lessons when the lessons show no association with their personal beliefs. Five teachers indicated that it wasn’t difficult to present the lessons. Three survey takers agreed that they were allowed to incorporate their own convictions/morals while teaching character education.

Hansen (1995) described teaching as “a calling” that someone chooses to follow (as cited in Eckert, 2011, p. 20). He stated, “For people of faith, the call to a vocation cannot be separated from the vocation, nor should it be” (as cited in Eckert, 2011, p. 20). Eckert (2011) explained that he views his students from the perspective that each one is a unique individual created special by a loving and caring God. In Eckert’s eyes, each child has value and therefore should be taught, loved, and viewed for the potential that they hold. He further noted that “public schools have been and will continue to be appropriate places for teachers of faith who respect the
legal and ethical boundaries of this open forum” (p. 23). The “legal and ethical boundaries” that Eckert referred to ultimately began when the church gave up its place in the formal education of children. In *Kingdom Education: God’s Plan for Educating Future Generations*, Schultz (1998) noted,

> When the church separated itself from the education of children and youth, it forfeited the opportunity to have a strong influence on the spiritual transformation of future generations. The church’s role in education became trying to counteract the negative impact of a secular educational system. (p. 99)

Ryan & Bohlin (1999) noted that often teachers are so fearful of crossing that line of separation between church and state that they are reluctant to discuss any type of values, morals, or character traits with their students. They perceived their role purely from an academic viewpoint. Schultz (1998) countered that view by stating,

> Kingdom education demands that teachers know the many ways that they will influence young people. It also requires that our children are under teachers who will teach the truth in love, knowing that how they live will have a lasting impact on those they teach.

> Kingdom education is God’s plan for educating future generations. (p. 55)

**Lesson Plan Analysis**

There were no strict guidelines for teachers sharing lesson plans. I requested one month of lesson plans in order to evaluate how often teachers mentioned character education in the plans, when character education was taught throughout the week, and how much detail the teachers put into the plans. I intended to dissect and group pieces of the documents using common words, procedures, and themes within the written documents.
Only two of the nine possible participants chose to share their lesson plans with me. Although eight of the nine teachers stated that they did not write character education lesson plans and felt that submitting copies would be a moot point, one of these eight did submit. The lone participant that does write character education in her plans was comfortable sharing them with me for analysis. However, they lacked sufficient detail to make them applicable for this research project. Therefore, there was no correlation to share between the research questions and lesson plans submitted for this project.

As expected, the first lesson plan that did not include character education was not informative regarding character education material. This participant tangentially mentioned a character trait in the context of morning calendar time. Specifically, the participant shared a poem titled *Friendship* with the classroom every day for one week. The plan did not include any details on how the poem was to be used or discussed. Within the book *7 Habits for Happy Kids* the characters are presented as friends that learn valuable lessons together. However, there is no way to know if the poem presented during this time was used for character education. Other than this poem, the only mention of character education came later in the month when the participant noted that the counselor would come into the classroom and present a lesson. There were no details on the type of lesson the counselor would present.

The lone participant that included character education material in her lesson plan appeared to be the strongest character education advocate. Though I asked that no identifying information be included on the plans, she physically handed her contribution to me at the conclusion of the interview. The identification had been removed to protect her identity. This teacher made a conscious decision to include character education lessons Monday through
Thursday of each week. Her plans identified the character trait that would be the focus of the day and the name of a story that would be shared to introduce the trait. The plans included specific tasks such as role playing, brainstorming on chart paper, partner sharing, and group discussions. Additionally, key words such as character, habits and morals were often mentioned. More details regarding her use of character education will be discussed through her interview notes.

Themes

Four distinct themes were shown through the research process. After multiple readings of the survey responses, lesson plans, and interview texts, I utilized phenomenological reduction to extract common essences that directly related to the research questions. These themes included a dislike of the chosen curriculum, a question regarding the benefits of character education, a question regarding who is responsible for character education, and a separation of personal beliefs. Samples of participant responses will be given as support of the extracted themes.

A Dislike of the Chosen Curriculum

Only one of the four teachers interviewed felt that the 7 Habits of Happy Kids by Sean Covey was an appropriate choice of a character education curriculum. Kathy stated:

I really, really like the Seven Habits for Kids. Now some teachers find that the wording is very, very difficult, but if you sit and you explain it and you model it and you talk through it, they (the students) know exactly what it is. Sure, it’s going to be foreign if you’re just slapped with it and told to teach it. You have to put some effort into it and you have to really study.
In contrast, Christy asserted:

The traits are so complicated and above their grade-level of understanding. “Synercise”, ”synergize” (she wasn’t sure which it was), it’s hard for them to connect with those traits that we’ve switched from just basically being responsible to being a “win-win.”

Repeatedly, three of the four participants stated that they were not involved in choosing the new curriculum. Joyce stated, “I think there were some people on the committee. A first-grade teacher was on the committee, but as a grade-level, no we didn’t choose it.” Kathy was the only participant that was involved in the choice of curriculum models. She shared:

Yes, I was on the committee three years ago when the principal was trying to implement it throughout the school, so I was on the committee to figure out how to do it, the best ways to do it, researched a lot of books that would be helpful to teachers, that sort of thing.

Three indicated that they were never given a copy of the book for reference. Christy mentioned:

The books were in the book room for checkout use, but they were mainly for the teachers that participated in the workshop and they only allowed fifteen teachers from our faculty to go so that’s why I don’t feel like that I do isolated lessons because I don’t have access to the curriculum.

The scarcity of staff involvement in the curriculum selection and training process may have contributed to a dissatisfaction of the program. Kirk and Macdonald (2001) stated, “Where teachers are positioned within the curriculum reform process lies at the heart of the issues of teachers’ ownership of curriculum innovations ... and the appropriate relationships between partners in large-scale curriculum reform” (p. 557). Although books and curriculum guides were
not issued to each teacher, they were made available for check-out from a school book room. Each participant indicated that they were aware of the availability of the books and guides, but had made no effort to explore the materials. Furthermore, teachers were never offered any type of training on the use of the Covey curriculum. When asked how the curriculum was introduced to the staff, Joyce explained:

I think they just talked about the different characteristics and gave us a list of what they were and a basic description and told us some materials that we could look at to help us, but there wasn’t really any formal training.

Perhaps both the absence of a tangible book in the classroom and the need of training were contributing factors to the teacher’s lack of interest in the program.

**Christy.** Christy stated that the only knowledge she has of the *7 Habits of Happy Kids* curriculum is from morning intercom announcements and direct lessons conducted by the school counselor once a month. Her understanding is that the school has a trait that is highlighted throughout the month. The teachers are encouraged to discuss the trait and to notice students which exhibit the trait throughout the month. Christy explained that with little knowledge of the curriculum vocabulary, discussing these traits is a difficult task. She stated:

The traits are so complicated and above their grade level of understanding that it’s hard for them to connect with those traits that we’ve switched from just basically being responsible to being a ‘win-win.’ They can’t understand win-win versus take care of your own belongings, so it has just been harder since we’ve made that adjustment to these different traits for them to understand and connect the younger child.
She feels that the students have no point of reference for the advanced vocabulary that is used within the book. She asserted, “You can’t just start by saying, ‘sharpen your saw’ and that’s it for the announcement. There’s no beginning to that. It’s just like they are speaking another language.”

Joyce. Joyce was hesitant to criticize or praise the curriculum model, but stated that she encourages character traits through her choice of words and actions when dealing with students. She does not use the terminology associated with the 7 Habits of Happy Kids curriculum in the classroom. She stated:

For one thing, I think the terminology is very difficult for first-graders to understand. We still do honor a student every month. We just call them character kids (referring to how she incorporates the practice within her own room). Now they call them student leaders, and it is using those characteristics still, and to try to explain to a first-grader what that means, it’s just too difficult.

Joyce expressed belief that the convictions and beliefs of the curriculum are appropriate and that she can stand behind them. She commented, “They are very positive and I think it is something that we should all strive for- the characteristics that they cover, adults, children, we all.”

Tammy. Tammy appeared to know little about the 7 Habits of Happy Kids curriculum. When asked if the teachers had any input into the choosing of a curriculum, she simply stated, “Not that I know of.” When questioned about the introduction of the curriculum, she replied that she could not remember how or when they were shown the Covey book. She stated, “They might have given an overview to begin with what the seven habits were, but not even specifically what each habit meant.”
She feels that the vocabulary used in the Covey book is out of the realm of understanding for first graders. She prefers to incorporate the teaching of character traits through her social studies lessons. Tammy stated:

In the social studies [lessons], and we’re talking about the different characters that we talk about for the social studies. There are some words like perseverance and some of the character qualities that those particular characters had. These are even hard to explain to the students, especially when it’s a character that is 100 years old and they don’t have any reference point.

Tammy expressed that she would be comfortable teaching character education if given a curriculum that included trade books. She feels that the stories would be more age-appropriate in nature. She asserted:

Given a curriculum maybe with trade books, that kind of thing, because I think they can understand things that relate to them. They can understand even make-believe stories, or whatever, that teach to kids their own age that teach those kinds of qualities.

**Kathy.** Kathy is the lone teacher that seemed truly enamored with the teaching of character education. Following her question to her students regarding how they can create a “peaceable classroom”, she tells the class that they will be learning seven habits that will create a peaceable classroom for all. Kathy discussed focusing on a different trait each week until she has them all introduced. She explained:

I try to focus on a particular character, I’d say, once-a week. I usually bring in one of the traits, we read a book. I purposefully concentrate on the particular trait. There have been a lot of schools that have always done one particular trait, maybe every month, and then
by the end of the year you would get to the final trait. But, I believe that you teach them sort of quickly, but then you incorporate it throughout the year so eventually they’ll get it. She feels that only exposing the children to one character trait per month in an isolated segment is not effective. She reads a book that concentrates on a trait and gives the children an example to help the understanding. Kathy has incorporated a rewards system within her classroom around the seven habits. In the classroom, she points out students that exhibit good character traits so that everyone witnesses the reinforcement. The child that is praised is rewarded with a tiny soccer ball to place in their cup. The students are rewarded further once they acquire a certain number of balls. For example, she explained, “If you earn so many soccer balls, you get to do free centers on Friday afternoon.”

Kathy sees no problem with the choice of vocabulary in the 7 Habits of Happy Kids. She is comfortable that her students understand the trait labels because she takes the time to discuss the trait and what the vocabulary means. She does not just embed the traits among her other subjects. Instead, she makes a conscious effort to teach focused lessons as a part of her week as explained previously.

**Summary.** Three of the four participants do not appear to be concerned with character education. In contrast, the fourth participant is comfortable with the choice to include character education as a part of the curriculum. All of the participants commented on the difficulty of vocabulary that is used in the book. All agree that a first grade student might find understanding the vocabulary difficult. However, only the fourth participant made a point in presenting isolated lessons in order to introduce and explain the vocabulary so that her students could have an
understanding of what the words mean. The absence of materials and training may also be compounding factors toward teacher dissatisfaction of the chosen curriculum.

**Character Education: Is it beneficial?**

**Christy.** When Christy discussed her thoughts on the benefits of character education, she commented that there have been no noticeable changes in how children exposed to character education lessons compare with children not exposed to a character program. She simply answered, “No, I don’t see any differences.” The spoken words and behaviors of her students show no significant differences. She explained that all students get the same lesson, therefore no comparison groups exist. She explained:

> They’ll use some of the traits or the instructions that the counselor teaches, but I don’t see that it affects their behavior, but it’s just so hard at such a young age to determine if they’re being honest just because is that the way they were raised at home is is that from the lesson from the counselor. It’s hard to determine their choices, how it’s based upon, but I don’t see students that don’t receive it. Everybody gets it once-a month.

**Joyce.** Joyce’s thoughts were similar to Christy’s concerning the benefits of character education within the school setting. She explained that the school has been exposing the children to character traits for several years. Thus, the students received lessons with embedded character education in kindergarten as well. She was not sure if the behavior of her students might have been from the exposure from kindergarten versus the exposure they had in her first grade classroom. She stated, “They would have been doing it as well, to some extent, but you don’t know how much, so I really can’t say that I can see a difference.” Overall, Joyce did not appear to have witnessed any noticeable differences in the way her students act or perform compared to
past years of teaching. Thus, she could not comment on potential benefits of character education.

**Tammy.** Tammy stated that she saw no difference due to character education in her students’ behavior. She replied, “No, because I think our kids, it really doesn’t relate to them.” She referred to the character traits as qualities that would be observable, and states that she sees none of them in daily activities. Her observations were once again tied to the vocabulary used in the *7 Habits of Happy Kids* book. She explained, “They don’t have any point of reference. And honesty is something you almost have to teach through playacting or a story scenario to the young ones.” She feels that because the students do not relate to the book characters or terms used, “they don’t know how to better themselves with those qualities.”

**Kathy.** Kathy had a very different response. When asked if she had witnessed any differences in her students, she was quick to state:

Well, I actually tried to measure that, and when I measured that I was only using a year duration, so there wasn’t much difference, because this kind of thing has to be implemented as they grow, and I think it helped in the classroom. I definitely felt that the kids treated each other with greater respect.

She explained that based on results yielded from her own research, there was little change. However, her perception was that her classroom definitely shifted toward a betterment of climate. She offered this example:

I definitely see that they carry it home with them. We also talk about what is it? What’s in your bucket or have you filled your bucket or something like that. I’ve got several books about you always want to fill other people’s bucket with your good qualities and
being kind and generous to them and that makes them feel good. If you’re doing unkind things you are emptying their bucket, so the idea is to keep filling their bucket, and throughout the year, even when I read a story they say, ‘Oh, he’s a dipper. He’s dipping from that.’

**Summary.** Three of the four participants were in agreement regarding the benefits of character education. The fourth participant was in partial agreement. Christy, Joyce, and Tammy all stated that they could tell no difference in student behavior since the implementation of a character education program. Kathy explained that though her own research garnered no statistical data to support a huge spike in behavior improvements, her personal feelings were that the students exhibited an improvement in their treatment of each other.

**Who is responsible?**

This question helped to gather more data than previous questions during the interview. Each participant had strong feelings concerning the responsibility of teaching character education to students. This question also elicited mixed emotions for them.

**Christy.** Christy expressed strong feelings in this portion of the interview. When asked if she felt that the teaching of character education should be required of a first-grade teacher, she said:

No. I mean we are responsible for their reading level and their math. We have to meet every common core. We’re testing every nine weeks. I just don’t see how character education could be required. I think that it should be like the icing on the top, but it shouldn’t be required, because there is just so much that is already on our plate that I just
think that if you want to weave it in throughout the curriculum, but I don’t think it should be a requirement.

As this discussion progressed, I asked about parents’ thoughts. Christy felt that parents wanted the school to take ownership of raising their children, and she did not feel that it was her responsibility as a teacher. She shared:

They want the schools to take the ownership of raising their child, where the parents should be teaching these character traits from a young age so that it’s just part of whom they are. And that responsibility is falling on the educator to teach the child right from wrong. Of course the parents are going to be all for it. It’s just (that) one person can only do so much.

Her opinion was that parents should be teaching good character from an early age at home so that the children come to school knowing good character. She expressed that if this were happening at home, students would “come to school already knowing right from wrong and it wouldn’t slow down the process of learning.”

Joyce. Joyce also expressed feeling character education instruction should not be required of teachers. She stated, “I mean that’s terrible to say. Like I said, I do a lot of that, but when you say the word ‘required’, I think it scares everybody.” Her thoughts mirrored those of Christy’s in that she believed teachers already have a heavy load on them with testing, reading, and math requirements. She did not elaborate on the topic long, but offered a suggestion that schools should hold parent classes at the school to help them instill good traits at home. She laughed aloud as she then commented, “The people who do come, of course, are the ones who
their children are getting that training at home, so ideally that is where it should happen, and I know that doesn’t happen at all.”

**Tammy.** I was a bit surprised at Tammy’s statement regarding requiring teachers to implement character education. She stated, “These days? Probably, because it’s probably not being taught at home, just your basic just being kind, and how do you even go about doing that, so yeah.” Tammy felt that parents are supportive of character education being taught in the schools because this in-school character education removes the responsibility from parents teaching the same material at home. She commented, “Oh yeah [they’d be supportive] because it would take it off their responsibility.” She had never witnessed any of the parents’ disapproval of the curriculum because the traits taught are very general.

**Kathy.** When responding to the question regarding teacher responsibility of teaching character education, Kathy stated:

I really do believe it should be a facet in the curriculum. Like I said, I think especially because we’re nurturing these kids, and we are in essence responsible in a small part of their life to become valuable citizens down the road. And I think it is just crucial to teach them right and wrong and teach them what a good citizen is and what a bad citizen is and I think if we do our each little part from kindergarten it will create a nice adult.

Kathy discussed that she felt teaching had become a “cram, cram, cram” session, and that there are not many opportunities during the day to veer off the tested subjects. However, she expressed being passionate about her part in the training of children’s minds because she felt that she helped encourage them grow up to be kinder adults. She asserted, “I know there is seemingly a
lot less time, but I feel like if we can change any of these little children’s minds about something to be gentler with other kids or other people you know.”

**Summary.** Overall, participants shared the belief that if children did not receive character training at school, they probably were not going to receive any. Two of the participants felt that asking teachers to add another subject to their load was simply unreasonable. Both of these participants referred to the great pressures of reading and math test scores as major factors in their opinions. Neither of them wanted the responsibility of teaching character education.

Two participants shared the belief that character education should be taught in the schools. Their concerns were based on the notion that if good character is not being taught at home, character education needs to be taught somewhere. Both participants expressed beliefs that modeling their actions and behavior for students was equally important as teaching subject matter. Kathy offered an example that supports the notion that even parents benefit from character lessons:

Well, the dad was always in the habit of defending his son. I would get very negative emails from the dad, so I kind of gave him a little lesson in my own little way. I responded to him, ‘I’m teaching your son to be proactive. I’m teaching him to take care of himself and to make good choices and be responsible.’ And I worded it in such a way that like [sic], ‘Take a hint buddy.’

When asked if her comment had an influence on the child’s father, Kathy stated that there were no further discussions with the father, and she never received another negative comment. Specifically, she stated, “What could he say? You can’t argue with that.”
Separation of Personal Beliefs

Christy. Christy stated that the children seldom bring up their personal or religious beliefs within the school setting. She stated that sometimes God is mentioned in the classroom. Specifically, she mentioned, “Sometimes they talk about God or when we do natural resources is it man-made or is it natural. It’s just hard for me not to just say that was made by God if it’s natural, but that’s the only time.” When asked if she would have any concerns discussing God if He were brought up by the students, she stated, “I wouldn’t have a problem with that.” This statement indicated that she would not have a problem discussing her beliefs. She stated that administrators had never told her not to discuss her beliefs, so therefore she would have felt comfortable with potential discussions of this sort.

Joyce. Joyce also stated that the topic of religion seldom comes up her in classroom. She stated:

Sometimes I will hear them say things they’ve obviously learned in church and Sunday school. It isn’t always in reference to character things. Or, they’ll write something. I’ve seen writing sometimes, but it is more things like, ‘I know Jesus loves me, and I love Jesus.’ Things like that, so it is not really characters [traits] but it is things that they have or some little story they’ve written.

She had never been given parameters concerning the suitability of discussing religious views with her students, but commented that she liked to keep conversations general in nature. She explained, “I’ve never been told not to. It’s not something I would do though in general, now if they bring up something, I would discuss it, but I would try to bring up more of the secular world than church.” Joyce admitted that Christianity usually came up around the Christmas holidays,
and that she weaved a variety of views into her coverage of the subject when this time of year came.

**Tammy.** Tammy was very clear in stating that she has no problem discussing God or the *Bible* in her classroom. She even commented that, “Personally, it’s what we should be doing.” She expressed that her religious beliefs define her, and she will continue to discuss religious matters until she is told not to. She asserted, “I reference God and the *Bible*. Until I get in trouble I will, because that’s who I am.” Tammy stated that she did not bring up the subject of religion, but that she would finish any discussion of scriptural teachings that students might have initiated. Specifically, she stated, “I take it. I don’t bring it up usually, but if they do then we’ll finish the discussion. Maybe not add to, but we’ll finish the discussion.”

**Kathy.** Kathy expressed an entirely different stance than the other participants when asked about religious discussions within her classroom. She stated:

I don’t discuss it with them. I do not. If they ask a question based on a religious principle I tell them that’s something that you and your parents need to talk about and I transfer it, but I never bring that up.

She indicated that the subject of religion rarely came up within her classroom discussions. When religion did come up in her classroom, students typically were just expressing a fleeting comment or idea. Her strong answer indicated that she was not comfortable discussing the subject.

**Summary.** Participants’ thoughts on discussing religious principles within the classroom were divided. Two participants indicated that they have no problem sharing their religious views with students, and one participant even welcomed the comments of students. Two of the
participants expressed their hesitance in religious discussions within a school environment. Of these two hesitant participants, one preferred to stay neutral on the subject while the second one strongly opposed any mention of religion within her classroom.

Research Questions Answered

Research Question One

The first research question investigated how first grade teachers perceived their teaching of character education. This question stemmed from my desire to understand if the participants were comfortable with the responsibility of teaching character education, and further what they felt their responsibilities should entail. Survey and interview results were consistent regarding participant comfort level in teaching character education traits. However, when asked about the responsibility portion, only one half of the participants felt that it should be their responsibility.

Survey results indicated that participants felt character education should be included in the school curriculum. Further, survey results showed that participants liked teaching it to their students. Most indicated that character education is an important part of their curriculum, and all indicated that lessons are embedded within their plans. Face-to-face interviews confirmed these positive thoughts. However, most did not believe that *The 7 Habits of Happy Kids* was a good choice of character education curriculum. When asked directly if they were comfortable teaching character education, most indicated that they would have no problem with the idea of teaching this curriculum given that the traits would be understandable to students. Concerning the area of responsibility, two participants felt strongly that they should be responsible for teaching character traits to their students. The other two participants were opposed to teaching character education at school because they felt that teachers have enough responsibilities already.
Research Question Two

With this question, I investigated whether first grade teachers thought that character education program has an impact on students. This research question was pretty straightforward. Survey results indicated that most of the respondents agreed that teaching character education was a worthwhile endeavor. All participants felt that an accurate comparison could not be made between students because all students received the lessons beginning in kindergarten. Therefore, no comparison group existed. However, three of the four participants did comment positively on student behavior. As shown previously, Joyce had her students discuss reasons for their unhappiness when they appear to be unhappy in class. Further, while Christy felt that it would be hard to make a comparison, she noted that she occasionally noticed bits and pieces from character lessons exhibited by the students. However, she could not usually determine if their kindness was due to home reinforcement or from the counselor lessons. She offered:

They’ll use some of the traits of the instructions that the counselor teachers, but I don’t see that it affects their behavior, but it’s just so hard at such a young age to determine if they’re being honest just because it is the way they were raised at home or is it from the lesson from the counselor.

As stated previously, Kathy discussed her earlier attempt at measuring the difference between a group receiving character education lessons in comparison to a group of students not receiving character education lessons. She noted that her study results showed no significant differences, but personally felt that the classroom environment was more positive.
Research Question Three

With this question, I investigated the ways in which first grade teachers perceive and describe the influence that their personal beliefs have on teaching character educations. Survey data indicated an exact balance (three of seven agreed and three of seven disagreed) when participants were asked if they found it difficult to separate their personal convictions and moral from those of the set curriculum. Most participants felt that they were allowed to incorporate their personal beliefs into character lessons and were comfortable doing so. None of the surveys indicated that the curriculum conflicted with their own religious beliefs.

Interview transcriptions corroborated with the survey results. Tammy admitted that she has a hard time not “adding [her] take on the quality” being discussed. As stated previously, she mentioned that she did not bring up God or the Bible, but would engage in a discussion if initiated by the students. Joyce did not elaborate on her personal beliefs, but indicated that the curriculum did not conflict with her feelings. She said, “I think that the convictions and beliefs are appropriate. I can stand behind them very well. They are very positive and I think it is something that we should all strive for.” Christy indicated that she tried not to include her religious beliefs into character discussions, but admitted that it was hard for her not to comment. She shared, “I try not to, but that’s just my personality. I’ll accept another comment if it’s different. I’m not going to tell them they’re wrong just because they believe different than me, but I let it be known how I feel.” Finally, Kathy was the lone participant that avoided discussing the relationship between religious beliefs and character education. She strongly commented that she would not discuss religion with her students.
Summary

This chapter showed the results of research data gathered through online survey responses, lesson plan evaluations, and face-to-face interviews concerning teacher perceptions of a character education program. I targeted nine potential participants teaching character education. Seven of the targeted agreed to be a part of the data collection process. Four participants engaged in individual interviews that provided me with thick, rich language concerning their experiences surrounding the phenomenon being studied. Transcribed recordings from the interviews were taken through the phenomenological reduction process to construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Four themes were identified from the analyzed data. These themes included a dislike of the chosen curriculum, the benefits of character education, the responsibility of teaching character traits, and the separation of personal beliefs. Overall, results indicated that all the participants view the teaching of character education as a worthwhile endeavor. All indicated that they were comfortable with the subject and capable of its instruction. Most indicated that the chosen curriculum was not suitable for the grade level and therefore they rarely incorporated it into their lessons. Lastly, no participants felt that the curriculum conflicted with their personal and religious beliefs. All but one felt comfortable discussing religion with their students.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Common names of some character education programs include Character Counts, Positive Action, Values in Action, and Wise Skills. If conducting a search, one would find a multitude of articles and studies showing the expected benefits of utilizing character education. Wilhelm and Firmin (2008) stated, “Nobody in education is against character. That is, no thinking educator would proclaim that he/she hopes students lack character when they graduate from their respective institutions” (p. 183). Thus, researchers have evaluated character programs from a variety of angles. Specifically, researchers have investigated the origin of character education, the effect of socioeconomic status on character, the behavior of students, and the effect of these programs. For example, Marshall et al. (2011) conducted a review of existing character education research. Overall, they found,

Integrated character education results in an improved school environment, student prosocial and moral behavior, and reading and math test scores. Schools become more caring communities; student discipline referrals drop significantly, particularly in areas related to bullying behavior; and test scores in moderately achieving schools increase nearly 50%. (p. 51)

After reading Schultz’s (2002) Kingdom Education: God’s Plan for Educating Future Generations and Van Brummelen’s (2002) Steppingstones to Curriculum, I developed my understanding of the important role parents and teachers play in child development. As I began exploring additional information on the subject, I soon found that no research existed pertaining to teacher’s personal perceptions of a character education program. I began to wonder whether educators enjoy teaching character education, or if they feel forced in utilizing these programs.
Additionally, I wondered how educators felt with regard to sharing personal beliefs with students, or if they believed material should remain generic. Finally, I pondered whether educators notice differences between students that receive character education lessons and students that do not. As stated previously, researchers have investigated the benefits of teaching character education. However, I could not find any studies that indicated results on teachers’ self-perceptions. Thus, my goal became to investigate these perceptions.

My study focused on first grade teacher perceptions of character education. The participants consisted of first grade teachers at a school that utilized character education. I used a qualitative phenomenological research design, and incorporated Moustakas’ (1994) horizontalization method in order to gain insight into participants’ thoughts and feelings. With this design, I was able to explore the lived experiences of the teachers through the following research questions:

1. How do first grade teachers perceive their teaching of character education?
2. How do first grade teachers describe the impact that a character education program has on students?
3. How do first grade teachers perceive and describe the influence that their personal beliefs have on the teaching of character education?

Consistent with Gall’s (2007) suggestion, I collected data using a three-part process referred to as triangulation. Therefore, I offered participants an opportunity to participate by three different avenues: an online survey, a lesson plan evaluation, and a one-on-one interview session.

The online survey consisted of sixteen closed-end questions using an attitude scale to rank the participants level of agreement (see Appendix D). The collection of lesson plans was to
serve as a second means of data. Two participants submitted lesson plans. However, only one of the two included character lessons within her plans. Thus, only one lesson plan could be evaluated. Finally, four participants agreed to engage in face-to-face interviews.

This chapter consists of four sections: a summary of the findings through identified themes, a discussion of the findings and implications in light of the relevant literature and theoretical framework, an outline of the study limitations and recommendations for future research, and the conclusion. Current literature and participant voices were used for further discussion within each section.

Summary of the Findings

I targeted the school involved in my study because of the character education program in place at the start of my work. However, I was unaware of teachers’ perceptions regarding their roles in character education instruction. I utilized a transcendental phenomenological reduction process and discovered four themes during my investigation of lived experiences. The four themes included

- A Dislike of the Chosen Curriculum
- Character Education: Is it beneficial?
- Who is responsible?
- Separation of Personal Beliefs.

A Dislike of the Chosen Curriculum

After reviewing the data, I first observed a theme related to the teachers’ place in choosing curriculum models. Online survey results indicated that five out of seven teachers did not feel that their opinion was sought when their school administration opted for the 7 Habits of
Happy Kids character education model. These preliminary findings indicated that the participants harbored resentment regarding administrators’ implementation of this program. These findings were confirmed during the interview process. Overall, these responses indicated why teachers did not appear to be more involved in the implementation of character education.

In support of my findings, Shkedi (2009) examined the implementation of an externally written curriculum. He found, “The conception of teachers as ‘obedient’ to a written curriculum, which they interpret and adapt while preserving its essential principles, is inconsistent with the teachers’ own curriculum thinking” (p. 833). He also noted similar teacher attitudes in his earlier studies (1995; 1998). He stated, “Although tied formally to the official curriculum, [a teacher in the study] feels under no obligation to follow it” (2009, p. 833). Shkedi (2009) proceeded to share multiple observations revealing that teachers feel curriculums should only be used as “a source of stimulation and inspiration” (p. 851). He stated, “Teachers use some parts of the written curriculum and use other parts to trigger further growth in their students. Although teachers find the official curriculum tasks interesting, they do not consider them compulsory” (2009, p. 851).

In contrast, Chingos and Whitehurst (2012) asserted:

Teachers vary considerably in the way they use textbooks, teacher’s guides, and assessment materials, with some teaching strictly to-the-book and others exercising considerable flexibility. Despite such individual variability, in general, teachers are much more likely to cover topics presented in the materials selected by their school or district than to cover topics not included; they are likely to follow the sequence of topics in the
selected materials; and their pedagogical approach is influenced by the instructional
design of the materials. (p. 3)

Thus, literature has shown two very different views. One view indicates that teachers should
construct their own curriculum (i.e., Shkedi, 2009). In contrast, a second view indicates the
advantages of having a purchased curriculum (i.e., Chingos & Whitehurst, 2012). Overall, these
contradictory views indicate that teacher input is vital during the curriculum selection process.

**Implications.** Overall, findings indicate that board level planners might find recognizing
the thoughts of first grade teachers beneficial when considering the purchase of any curriculum
model. Increasing the consideration of various teacher comments concerning curriculum choices
could certainly lead to a difference in acceptance from those that will be implementing the
model. Chingos and Whitehurst (2012) stated, “The choice of instructional materials can have
an impact as large as or larger than the impact of teacher quality on student test scores” (p. 5).
These researchers found that only one of the participants showed enthusiasm about the
curriculum and some felt that the curriculum was not appropriate for their teaching. Thus, while
other factors also contributed to educators’ non-use of the 7 Habits of Happy Kids material, one
major factor was likely their lack of support for the chosen curriculum. Bulach (2002) stated,
“Unless the school leadership takes an active role, teacher will pay lip service to the character
education program, but will not really support it” (p. 81).

**Character Education: Is it beneficial?**

Second, I observed a theme involving the benefits of character education. For this theme,
my findings were somewhat contradictory. Results of the online survey indicated that six of the
seven teachers believed that character education was a worthy endeavor. Additionally, six of
seven felt that character education should be included as a part of the school’s curriculum. Further, five out of seven indicated that they liked teaching character education. However, five out of seven indicated that they did not take the time to present character education lessons in isolation. Further, the teachers’ lack of participation in lesson plan review indicates that the targeted teachers did not incorporate a substantial amount of character education curriculum into their plans. During the interview process, the participants appeared defensive when questioned about the benefits of character education. All participants perceived themselves to be important models for students, and all indicated that character traits help in the forming of caring adults. However, three of the four interviewees immediately expressed the lack of time they had to implement the added subject into their day.

Much literature has indicated support regarding the benefits of teaching character education. However, a clarification must be made with regard to whether these benefits are character-based or strictly academic-based. Participants in my study were very clearly categorizing character education with regard to behavior. Joyce offered this example:

At the beginning of the school year I would guide them all the way through the steps and now I’ll just say, ‘I think you two need to go and talk’ so they’ll go off by themselves and I’ll just sort of keep an ear sometimes and I hear that they are really handling it well.

Both behavior and academics were addressed within the research articles considered for this project. Benninga et al. (2006) stated, “The purpose of public schooling requires that schools seek to improve both academic and character education” (p. 449). Therefore, I considered articles that explored both.
Researchers have discussed behavior in terms of how character education programs have influenced core values (i.e., Brimi, 2009). Additionally, researchers have often used words such as morality, perseverance, responsibility, self-discipline, respect, and integrity. I found very little evidence indicating that a character education program would improve student behavior. Brimi (2009) pointed out that the effectiveness of these programs is not “emphasized as viable (i.e., measurable) part of the curriculum” (p. 129). He explained:

Certainly, a school can keep track of its office referrals, suspensions, detentions, and expulsions, but this only documents the worst behaviors of what should be a fraction of the total school population. A student might never step into the principal’s office or sit for detention, but he or she may not experience moral growth, either. Staying out of trouble does not equate to becoming a mature moral actor. (p. 129)

In his study, Revell (2002) noted the lack of agreement regarding benefits of character education programs. He pointed out that most research was conducted by program developers who might be biased toward finding these benefits.

Researchers sometimes addressed academics in relation to character education. However, the overall consensus related to the reduction of poor behavior issues and the instilling of core values. An increase in academic success was simply mentioned as a by-product. For instance, Ryan and Bohlin (1999) found, “As students are taught the meaning and value of possessing personal qualities such as diligence, attentiveness, and persistence and – when these behavioral standards are enforced, then students tend to score significantly higher on various meaning of assessment” (as cited in Wilhelm & Firmin, 2009, p. 193).
Benninga et al. (2006) conducted a multi-year study among several California schools. Using a list of six criteria that they felt defined character education, their research found a positive correlation between the implementation of a character education program and academic achievement. The list included:

- Promotion of core ethical values as the basis of good character
- Parent and community involvement
- Core values are instilled in all phases of school life
- Staff members share responsibilities for and attempt to model good character
- Fostering of an overall caring community
- Opportunities for most students to practice moral actions

These researchers noted that none of the criteria above directly addressed academic success. Therefore, academic improvement has not been directly linked to a character education program.

**Implications.** All of the participants agreed that character education is important. Most stated that they felt comfortable teaching character traits. Yet, the majority of participants felt strongly that character education should be taught at home so that teachers would have more time to spend preparing students for academic success. Additionally, the interviewed teachers stated that they could not observe whether there were significant differences in students’ behavior resulting from the program because their students were exposed to the material for the entire year. Additionally, all students in the school were exposed to the curriculum, preventing any potential differences between groups from being observed.
Who is responsible?

Responsibility surfaced as the third theme. Results regarding responsibility were also somewhat contradictory. Six teachers agreed that character traits should be taught at home, and six also indicated that it should be a part of the school’s curriculum. However, only two teachers felt comfortable submitting lesson plans for review, and three of the four interviewees indicated that they did not teach character education in isolated lessons. Combined, these results indicated that the teachers might not have cared for the chosen curriculum and/or lack the time they had to implement the curriculum.

The debate surrounding responsibility does not negate the fact that “adult guidance is an essential ingredient in transforming children’s natural moral inclinations into dependable and effective character traits” (Damon, 2010, p. 37). However, Damon (2010) asserted:

It is the vital responsibility of every school to work with the vigorous moral sense that students bring with them in a way that turns these inclinations into solutions for the ethical challenges students will confront. In a world where parents are not always on the scene and many communities have disintegrated, the bridge from a student’s natural moral sense to the student’s established moral character runs through the school. (p. 38)

I have not found evidence stating that educators dislike teaching character traits. Linking to the previously discussed theme, most teachers felt that it is part of their commission to provide guidance that helps build more responsible and moral adults. Face-to-face interviews revealed the underlying concern. Specifically, the debate does not revolve around whose responsibility it is to teach character as much as it does the lack of time to teach character education. Within her face-to-face interview, Christy stated:
I mean, we are responsible for their reading level and their math. We have to meet every common core. We’re testing every nine weeks. I just don’t see how character education could be required. I think that it should be like the icing on top, but it shouldn’t be required because there is just so much that is already placed on our plate.

Further, Stiff-Williams (2010) used the word “collides” when describing the relationship between character education and “the drive for standards-based education” (p. 116). She recognized that administrators have come down hard on teachers to ensure they were doing as much as possible to help students to meet state-mandated learning standards. Therefore, the “prospect of any new emphasis on a noncore subject is likely to trigger resistance, if not insurrection, from stakeholders” (p. 116). She purported that character education should be aligned with the state standards and integrated within the subject areas. This way, teachers will not feel that they are burdened further.

**Implications.** With the initiation of the Common Core State Standards, educators have become even more focused on student achievement. Many teachers fear that despite their best efforts, the academic success or failure of their students will be the driving force behind their effectiveness ratings. Benninga et al. (2006) recognized these concerns early on. They stated, “Despite the clear national interest in character education, many schools are leery of engaging in supplementary initiatives that, although worthy, might detract from what they see as their primary focus: increasing academic achievement” (p. 448). Thus, curriculum planners should consider the implications of adding character education to a load that is already targeted toward academics.
Separation of Personal Beliefs

With the final theme, I observed whether teachers could separate their personal beliefs from their teaching of character education. Survey and personal interview results were consistent for this theme. Lesson plans could not be used in evaluating this phenomenon. Results indicated that three of the participants felt comfortable with the curriculum aligning with their personal beliefs. These results are likely due to the fact that Sean Covey focuses on character traits that most view as generic in *The 7 Habits of Happy Kids*.

Surprising results emerged during the interview process. Three of the four participants do not like the *The 7 Habits of Happy Kids* curriculum, and further indicated that they do not use the curriculum as a part of their teaching. However, these three participants all stated that they would have no problem discussing religious topics with their students if the subject were broached by the students themselves. The participant that was most enthusiastic about the *The 7 Habits of Happy Kids* curriculum indicated that she refused to incorporate religious views into her classroom conversations.

As previously indicated, survey and interview results were consistent in regards to personal beliefs. Most participants felt comfortable discussing religious topics with students. Wilhelm and Firmin (2008) stated, “Character development, at least at the conceptual level, is at the heart of all education- Christian or non-Christian” (p. 182). They further pointed out, The philosophy of character education traditionally has been dependent upon the Biblical standard on which the Judeo-Christian ethical system is founded. The absence of such a central belief as a divine law makes the attempt of moral development and character
education a sublime objective for those who reject the Biblical standards for ethics. (pp. 187-188)

Further, Prestiwich (2004) implied that no matter the religious beliefs, if one is an educator, he or she is serving as a character role model for the students that he or she teaches. Specifically, she stated, “Teachers, however, do teach character, both good and bad, by example in the actions they take or refuse to take” (p. 148). Additionally, Brimi (2009) evaluated the dilemma that teachers have often felt when discussing the implementation of character education. He noted that the educational system in Britain recognized the plurality of their society. In other words, they drafted a set of universal virtues that allowed the schools to teach values in such a way as to avoid conflicts in religious doctrine. This may sound like a solution, however, then the debate would likely turn to the choosing of virtuous traits. These thoughts may explain why some educators prefer to simply stay neutral. According to Brimi (2009),

Teacher nonparticipation is understandable in an era when we are careful to not impose unwanted beliefs on others. Cultural pluralism has become widespread, resulting in a paucity of homogenous communities. Under these circumstances, teacher may be wise in choosing not to address moral issues. (pp. 129-130)

**Implications.** A final implication to consider is the impact of personal beliefs on teaching character education. While most teachers did not appear to have any issues separating their personal beliefs from teaching character education, survey results indicated a couple of the teachers did have a hard time with this separation. This difficulty could stem from a lack of training on the chosen curriculum. Exploring this possibility and investigating ways to prevent this inability to separate could reduce the hesitancy of teachers to implement the program.
Theoretical Implications

The theoretical framework involved traits outlined in *The 7 Habits of Happy Kids*. As previously stated in chapter two, Covey (2008) felt that the book teaches good values to students in three ways: the power of living according to principles, common language to use with parents and teachers, and identification of their own character traits. He stated, “Principles are like gravity. They are timeless, universal, and self-evident. And they are needed today more than ever” (p. 8). First and foremost, I feel parents and educators (all adults for that matter) should use the teachings of Christ as the ultimate guide for raising children. There is a tremendous supply of stories from the *Bible* that have been written and illustrated for a child’s level of understanding. However, I do feel that Covey’s book would make a great companion resource to add for use with young children.

The first goal of Covey’s book was to teach children to live according to principles. To recap, the “7 Habits” were the principles that the book focused on. They included: Be Proactive, Begin with the End in Mind, Put First things First, Think Win-Win, Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood, Synergize, and Sharpen the Saw. Each habit was covered in depth earlier in his study. While pondering each of these principles, I was drawn back to the original sources of my interest, the books that led me in the direction of character education as a research topic. These books included *The Bible, Kingdom Education: God’s Plan for Educating Future Generations, and Steppingstones to Curriculum.*

While Covey’s choices of unique labels are not found in the word of God, they do focus on basic principles that can be found throughout the Bible. In Schultz’s book, *Kingdom Education: God’s Plan for Educating Future Generations* (1998), he stated:
God’s Word provides each Christian with principles needed to put kingdom education into practice. These biblical principles must be studied, understood, and practiced in every aspect of life regardless of age. However, it is extremely critical that these principles be carefully and diligently applied to children and youth. It is common knowledge that the easiest time in life to capture a person’s heart for Christ is during the childhood years. (p. 155)

Schultz further explained that as our society becomes more diverse, more people feel that educating the young is a shared responsibility. He makes it very clear, through scripture references, that parents are whom God holds responsible for training their children. Though I do not disagree with this stance, I personally feel compelled to use my position as an educator to reinforce Christian principles that should be taught by parents. This desire is driven by the fear that many students do not come from Christian homes and therefore have no training in basic Christian principles. I believe that it is my calling as a child of God to share the good news through the avenue of teaching. Van Brummelen (2002) pointed out that not everyone thinks in this way. He shared, “Many educators today claim that as autonomous beings, students must construct their own reality and meaning, and choose their own values. There is no absolute truth, they say” (p. 48). This type of attitude and point of view should further enhance the urgency for teaching Christian values.

Covey’s second goal of the 7 Habits of Happy Kids was to equip children, parents, and teachers with a common language surrounding the traits. His manner of accomplishing this task was to coin some catchy phrases that would help the children recall each principle. One example of this was “Win-Win.” When the children used this phase they remembered that instead of
thinking just of self, they should consider the thoughts and feelings of the other person as well, creating a beneficial situation for everyone. This method is often very successful. Children typically enjoy participating in the use of their own language. Examples of such language might include “awesome,” “off the chain,” or “out of sight.” All of these terms simply mean that the child viewed something as favorable, great, or exciting. Participating in this language can seem silly to teachers or parents. However, Covey understood that when children are excited about a concept, they are more apt to fully engage in learning and using the concept. This view implies that both parents and teachers should learn and use the vocabulary introduced through the stories in order to maximize the benefits of the 7 Habits of Happy Kids.

The final goal of The 7 Habits of Happy Kids book surrounded the identification of self through the characters in each story. At the beginning of this paper, I pointed out how much of the world’s people have become centered on themselves. Covey recognized that children tend to view events and circumstances according to how they feel, and not from another person’s point of view. As adults, we are often just as guilty. I think of Covey’s characters and story lines in terms of parables. Like a parable, the simple stories indicate moral lessons. Even Jesus recognized that teaching through parables provided a way for his disciples and followers to easily understand what he was sharing. Stories are often an easy method of understanding principles and are easy for children to recall. Stories are also easy to retell. Hansen and Zambo (2005) agreed by stating,

Picture books contextualize concepts, illustrate vocabulary and ideas, and help students make connections, scaffold their learning, and develop reasoning skills. To introduce
theories and concepts, we read books aloud to our students, and encourage them to
discover connections between theory and a character’s behaviors and ideas. (pp. 40-41)

**Limitations**

As with any study, this research had limitations. The first limitation was the narrow
goal of the targeted group. The sample was one of convenience, which limited generalizability.
Specifically, the nine targeted teachers may not be representative of all first grade teachers
involved with a character education program. Only seven of the nine agreed to participate in an
online survey, two in lesson plan critique, and four in the face to face interviews, further
narrowing the sample size. In the future, including first grade teachers at more than one school
would likely increase the representativeness of the sample. The second limitation was the use of
only one grade level, once again, creating a homogenous population which restricts the ability to
generalize findings. Expanding the study to include multiple grade levels within the school
might garner different results. Expanding the study in this way would also provide an
opportunity to obtain a larger, more representative sample.

Another factor to consider that could affect the results of the study might be the
geographical location of the school. The studied school is located in an area of the nation
nicknamed “The Bible Belt.” Participants’ religious beliefs might vary the results if the study
were conducted in another part of the United States. Additionally, only one race and one gender
were investigated in the study. All the participants of the study were Caucasian women.
Therefore, ethnicity and gender diversities did not exist among the gathered data. A study that
targets specific ethnicities or genders might garner other themes that were not discovered in this
study. Further, including other ethnicities in addition to male and female participants could increase the representative value of results.

The results of this study were based on public school teacher perceptions. Teachers employed at a private school might produce different results. Results might also vary between privately funded schools and Christian schools. Comparing perceptions among an array of school types would likely broaden the themes indicated by results.

A final limitation was character education training. Of the five interview participants, only one of the teachers attended training sessions on the curriculum to be used. Changing the participant pool to include all trained or all untrained teachers could possibly alter the assortment of views.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was designed to show insight into the ways first grade teachers perceived their role as character education instructors. Three research questions guided the study, but many more questions formed based on the results. Thus, a variety of possible topics for future research surfaced throughout the study. The study’s limitations indicate that comparing first grade teacher thoughts among multiple schools could be beneficial to investigate in future research. Further, widening the study pool might garner a more representative set of results. Feedback from these studies could provide district planners better insight into the quality of the curriculum.

Another recommendation for future studies would be to expand the analysis into a longitudinal study that includes teachers from kindergarten through fifth grade in the target school. This type of investigation might be helpful in showing how the continuation of the program builds character traits among the students. Further, this type of study would provide a
large amount of gathered data which could potentially help evaluators when deciding on curriculum. Uncontrollable factors such as teacher changes or student transfers might inhibit or skew study results. However, researchers might find advantage in following a group of students throughout their elementary years as a means of truly weighing the long-term effects.

A future researcher might also include a more diverse set of participants. All of the teachers targeted in my study were Caucasian women. Finding a setting that employs a variety of ethnicities and genders could very well broaden the results of my study. Again, viewpoints and perceptions could change with a different set of educators. This type of further investigation would provide feedback from a more diverse group concerning the use of a character education program.

Another option for future research might include teachers or schools located in different parts of the country. As mentioned in the limitations section, the school targeted for this study is located in an area referred to as “The Bible Belt.” This area consists of southern United States with a large protestant, church-attending population. The United States has become a melting pot of ethnicities and religions. Thus, conducting the research in another area of the country might produce significantly different results.

A final area of future research should include a comparison between teachers that did receive character education training as a requirement of their pre-service program and teachers that did not receive this type of training. Jones et al. (1998) conducted a study on character education and found that this subject is not a high priority among teacher preparation curriculums. Additionally, Milson and Mehlig (2002) found that in a general sense, educators
feel that teacher education programs never address the subject of character education. In a similar and more recent study, Temli, Sen and Akar (2011) found that

Eighty-four percent of the participants disagreed that they attended a course on moral education during pre-service education, and about more than ninety percent reported that they did not attend any seminar during in-service education. Both parties thought that the amount of moral education they undertook was rather insufficient to understand how to deal with moral education and how to cope with moral dilemmas in the school context. (p. 2065)

Narvaez and Lapsley (2008) compared two approaches that they have observed among teacher preparation programs. They stated:

The first approach views character education as immanent to best practice instruction. Hence, in order to be assured that the moral formation of students will be in good hands, the teacher educator need only ensure that preservice teachers are prepared to be outstanding teachers. (p. 158)

The second approach also indicated that instructional best practice is an integral part of moral character formation. However, Narvaez and Lapsley (2008) sensed that best practices “is not sufficient to equip students with the skills necessary to negotiate the demands of modern life” (p. 162). Further, they purported that, “preservice teachers [need to] learn a toolkit of pedagogical skills that targets moral character education as an explicit curricular goal” (p. 169). These conflicting sides indicate that future researchers might benefit from further investigation of teacher preparedness in the area of character education. A comparison of educators from the two
types of pre-service programs could provide valuable knowledge for school districts weighing the importance of in-service training for newly adopted curriculums.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of first grade teachers concerning character education instruction. The study attempted to offer a new viewpoint of the phenomenon by exploring the thoughts and attitudes of teachers currently implementing a character education program titled *The 7 Habits of Happy Kids* by Sean Covey. Though much research and data exists surrounding character education, I found a significant lack of research regarding educators’ perspectives on the curriculum. My use of a qualitative design allowed me to engage in open dialogue with participants. This opportunity provided a personal approach, garnering thick, rich language describing the lived experiences. The results of the study clearly identified four themes that administrators and curriculum directors should consider when contemplating the adoption of new curriculum models. Overall, I hope the results of this study will encourage teachers to find their voice and become actively involved in the curriculum adoption process.

As Howard et al. (2004) stated:

Character education comes with the territory of teaching and schooling. It is not a question of whether to do character education but rather questions of how consciously and by what methods. The political sands will shift and create different contexts. In spite of these changes, character education will continue and character educators will continue to grapple with questions of how to be our best ethical selves and how best to help students to know, care about, and do the right thing. (p. 210)
References


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APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

FIRST GRADE TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF A CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM

Dear Participants,

The following information is provided for you to decide if you would like to participate in a study. You are free to choose not to participate or withdraw from the study at any point.

The purpose of this study is to determine how first grade teachers feel about teaching character education as a part of the curriculum.

Data will be collected using the following methods: a survey, written commentary, interviews and lesson plan evaluation. Your participation in one of the methods does not require your participation in all. Your identity will be kept confidential. Your name will not be associated with any aspect of the study and will only be known to the researcher. There are no known risks involved with your participation in this study.

Please sign this form giving your consent with an understanding of the nature and purpose of this study. A copy of this form will be given to you to keep.

Signature of Participant__________________________________________________

Date_________________________________________________________________

Gina Sullivan Skinner, Principal Researcher

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

mrsginaskinner@gmail.com or Gina_Skinner@liberty.edu
April 8, 2013

Gina S. Skinner
IRB Approval 1551.040613: First Grade Teacher Perceptions of a Character Education Program

Dear Gina,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,
APPENDIX C: QUESTIONNAIRE

1. I understand the nature of Mrs. Skinner’s study. Yes No

2. I am willing to supply a one month copy of my lesson plans for her study. Yes No

3. I understand that all identifying information should be removed before submitting a copy of the plans for review. Yes No

4. I understand that there will be a written survey for me to take. Yes No

5. I understand that the answers provided on the survey will not be linked to me or my computer. Yes No

6. I am willing to allow the researcher to conduct an individual interview with me for the study. Yes No

7. I understand that my interview will be audio-taped and that the tape will be transcribed for the researchers study. Yes No

8. I understand that there may be follow up questions beyond the initial interview if clarity is needed. Yes No

9. I understand that all information will be coded for confidentiality and that all documents/recordings will be kept under lock for security. Yes No

10. I understand that the research results will be shared with GCPS. Yes No
APPENDIX D: SURVEY QUESTIONS

Survey questions were ranked using the categories: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, and no opinion. I emailed a link to each targeted participant. Participants completed the survey online using a site titled Survey Monkey. Responses will not be linked to the participants. Therefore, survey results will remain anonymous.

1. Character education is an important part of my curriculum.
2. I teach character education in isolated lessons.
3. Character Education is embedded within my plans.
4. I was given a choice whether or not to include character education in my curriculum.
5. Teaching character education is a worthwhile endeavor.
6. It is difficult to separate my personal convictions/morals/beliefs from those of the set curriculum.
7. I am allowed to incorporate my own convictions/morals while teaching character education.
8. The school system prepared me for teaching character education.
9. Support and guidance are offered, within my school, for the teaching of character education.
10. Teacher opinions were sought when the character education program was chosen.
11. I have difficulty presenting some of the lessons because they do not align with my personal beliefs.
12. Character education should be taught at home.
13. Character education should not be included in the school curriculum.
14. I do not like the responsibility of teaching character education.

15. I like teaching character education to my students.

16. Students enjoy the character education lessons.
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview questions will consist mostly of open-ended questions in an effort to allow the participants to feel that they can elaborate on their experiences. Additional questions may arise if the desired rapport is obtained.

1. How long have you been teaching character education?
2. Were you given a choice or were you able to provide feedback on the curriculum that was chosen for implementation? How was it introduced for your use?
3. Do you teach the lessons in isolation or are they embedded? Please explain.
5. Do you find it difficult to separate your own convictions/beliefs from those within the curriculum that is used?
6. Have you noticed any differences between students that you’ve taught in the past—without character education presented—compared to the students that you have taught including the curriculum? Please give examples.
7. Do you feel that teaching character should be required of you? Why or why not?
8. Are parents supportive of teaching character in school? Have any parents ever requested that their child be excused from that portion of the curriculum?
9. What evidence can you offer that the teaching of character makes a difference? Please give examples.
10. Is the Bible ever referred to by you or your students within character lesson conversations? If so, how was that handled?
11. Are you allowed to offer a discussion around Biblical teaching if the subject is initiated by the student? Please explain how this might be handled.