Relationships Between Character Education and School Climate

A doctoral thesis presented

by

Hasan Karaburk

to

The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
December 6, 2016
Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationships between character education and school climate based on the lived experiences and beliefs of teachers. The research was conducted in a public middle school to explore understandings and beliefs of teachers about character education and its perceived impact on school climate. Social learning theory was used as a theoretical framework to ground this research. This qualitative research employed interview study as the research methodology. Teachers’ interviews were used as the main data collection instrument. Analysis of interviews revealed three significant themes emerging from current practices. These themes were: Character education promotes social skills development; Character education helps develop positive personal skills; and Character education contributes to a safe school environment. This qualitative interview study suffered from four main limitations. They were sample size, semi-structured nature of the interview process, timing of the interview, and diversity of the participants. This research concluded there is a positive relationship between character education and school climate. However, the research also indicated there was a consensus among participants about character education not being the only factor affecting school climate as there were several other factors playing a role in improved school climate. Further research may be warranted to examine the degree in which character education, among other factors, is playing a role in shaping school climate. These findings may provide a vantage point for scholar-practitioners to focus on designing, implementing, and evaluating character education in an effort to improve overall school climate.

Keywords: Character education, school climate, interview study, teachers’ perceptions of character education, social learning theory, National School Climate Council
Acknowledgements

This has been a long journey with many rough roads to walk on and many hills and valleys to pass through before I hit the finish line. This entire academic journey was filled occasionally with hope, motivation, and enthusiasm, yet sometimes with hopelessness, exhaustion, and anxiety. Therefore, I would like to express my heart-filled gratitude to all friends and colleagues who offered unconditional support and helped me though this journey.

I am thankful to the faculty and staff at Northeastern University. Special thanks go out to my thesis advisor, Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed, for her support, encouragement, and professional feedback during this journey. It’s with no doubt that this journey would not have been a success story without her invaluable guidance. Thank you Dr. Medwed for all you did for me, certainly the most appreciated.

Second to my advisor, the biggest source of support, morale and motivation to me was family. A special thanks goes out to my wife Melek Karaburk, who since the beginning of this journey, offered me unconditional support, love, and great patience. In addition to preparing fresh tea and coffee for me, she helped me great by engaging critical and meaningful discussion especially during drafting chapters 4 and 5. A special love-filled thanks goes out to my children Enes and Munise for being so patience and tolerant with me during this important endeavor.

Additionally, I would like to express my deeper gratitude to Dr. Kelly Conn, who served as my second critical reader and offered a series of thought-provoking ideas for moving forward during my oral defense.

Finally, a special thanks go out to Dr. Selin Y. Nielsen for being my critical friend in this long journey. Thank you Dr. Nielsen for serving as my third reader and offering valuable feedback during my final defense.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ...................................................................................................................................... 2

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. 3

Chapter 1: Introduction ............................................................................................................ 8

Statement of the Problem ........................................................................................................ 8

Research Question .................................................................................................................. 9

Evidence Justifying the Research Problem ............................................................................ 9

The Significance Statement ..................................................................................................... 12

The Audience ............................................................................................................................ 14

Positionality Statement .......................................................................................................... 15

Self ........................................................................................................................................ 16

Self in Relation to Others ...................................................................................................... 16

From Self to the System ......................................................................................................... 17

Researcher Bias ....................................................................................................................... 18

Theoretical Framework .......................................................................................................... 20

Research Method .................................................................................................................... 22

Chapter 2: Literature Review .................................................................................................. 24

Literature Review .................................................................................................................... 24

The Discovery Argument ....................................................................................................... 24

Character Education ............................................................................................................. 25
School Climate ......................................................................................................................... 27
The complicated nature of influencing character ................................................................. 29
The Advocacy Argument ....................................................................................................... 30
The gap .................................................................................................................................. 35
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 36

Chapter 3: Research Methodology ....................................................................................... 38
Methodology ........................................................................................................................ 38
Research Design .................................................................................................................. 40
Research Tradition ................................................................................................................ 41
Participants ............................................................................................................................ 43
Recruitment and access ........................................................................................................ 45
Data collection ....................................................................................................................... 47
Data storage .......................................................................................................................... 49
Data Analysis ........................................................................................................................ 50
Trustworthiness ..................................................................................................................... 51
Generalizability .................................................................................................................... 52
Protection of Human Subjects .............................................................................................. 52

Chapter 4: Data Analysis ..................................................................................................... 54
Research Findings ................................................................................................................ 54
Data Research Site ............................................................................................................... 54
Data Collection and Participant Information .......................................................... 55
Teacher 1: Ms. Laila ................................................................................................. 57
Teacher 2: Ms. Slow ................................................................................................. 60
Teacher 3: Ms. Queen ............................................................................................. 64
Teacher 4: Ms. Sharp ............................................................................................... 68
Themes Emerged During the Data Analysis ............................................................ 70
Theme 1: Character education promotes social skills development ....................... 71
Theme 2: Character education helps develop positive personal skills .................... 74
Theme 3: Character education contributes to a safe school environment ............... 78
Irregularities Revealed in Data Analysis .................................................................. 83
Summary of Findings ............................................................................................... 86
Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings .......................................................................... 89
Discussions, Implications and Recommendations .................................................... 89
Summary of Findings ............................................................................................... 89
Contribution to Research ......................................................................................... 92
Findings in Relation to Literature and Theoretical Framework ............................... 94
Limitations of the Study ......................................................................................... 101
Implication for Practice ......................................................................................... 102
Recommendation for Future Research .................................................................... 104
Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 106
References

Appendices

Appendix A: Informed Consent

Appendix B: Interview Protocols and Interview Questions
Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Schools committed to character education have been reportedly enjoying the outcomes of their efforts in creating a safe, warm, and predictable yet meaningfully engaging atmosphere conducive to maximum learning (Character Education Partnership, 2012). Character education has attracted serious attention, including media coverage, and is increasingly becoming a popular topic in the fields of education and educational psychology (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2006). The motivation behind this growing interest is twofold. First, as recent research has consistently shown, a positive correlation exists between good character education programs and social capital of students (England, 2009; Mosser, 2006; Sparks, 2008). Second, studies confirm character education is associated also with the creation of a safe school environment, which is one of the important facilitators and essential components of quality education (Character Education Partnership, 2012).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2011), during the 2009–10 school year, 85 percent of public schools recorded one or more crime incidents had taken place at school, totaling an estimated 1.9 million crimes. Research (Benninga, 2010; England, 2009, & Mosser, 2006) and pervasive media coverage (New York Times, 2012) about growing discipline-related problems in schools have been disconcerting to educators and administrators. These problems include, but are not limited to, the following: violence, crime, cheating, bullying, drug, alcohol, and teenage pregnancy. Character Education Partnership (n.d.) reports character education programs emphasizing fairness, justice, rule of law, dialogue, civility, respect, tolerance, and coexistence will help create safe and comfortable, yet predictable,
learning environments, which enables students to maximize their full potential (Mosser, 2006; England, 2009).

Therefore, the primary purpose of this dissertation is, based on the lived experiences and beliefs of teachers, to explore the relationship between character education program and its perceived impact on changing school climate.

**Research Question**

The overarching line of inquiry guiding this dissertation is “How do teachers understand and describe character education based on their lived experiences?” The following questions will help explore further the possible impacts of character education programs and overall school climate. 1) What are the perceptions of school teachers and their experiences with character education as they relate to changing school climate? 2) How do teachers utilize the outcomes of character education?

**Evidence Justifying the Research Problem**

The debate about character education has intensified since 1980 when scholars and educators began raising concerns about the behavioral decay in American culture and values. Among the most frequently cited reasons for this decay are changes in the structure of the family, the effects of 1960’s culture with the emphasis on freedom, sex, and drugs, too much emphasis on individualism, and the lack of proper character education program in schools (Turiel, 1983; Nucci, 1997).

In a society where school violence, bullying, and tobacco and alcohol use among students are increasing, there needs to be a nationwide, conscious effort to promote pro-social, positive character development among students (Brannon, 2008). The federal government and other legal authorities recently issued statements that schools have a dual responsibility to pursue
improvements in intellectual capital and to contribute to character formation in students. Former Secretary of Education Rod Paige expressed his frustration when he said, “Sadly, we live in a culture without role models . . . this culture of callousness has led to a staggering achievement gap, crime, violence, teenage pregnancy, and tobacco and alcohol abuse . . . good character is a product of good judgments made every day” (Benninga, et al., 2010, p. 2). While the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act requires schools to contribute not only to students’ intellectual capital but also to their character formation, some administrators remain skeptical about the positive effects of character education on overall school climate (Cauley, 2009).

According to Dotson and Wiscont (2001), a change in school climate after an implementation of a character program may be considered as a sign of a school transforming itself from a traditional setting to one being driven by character education.

A school climate with both its hidden and explicit curriculum help shape and inform daily experiences for students, educators, staff, administrators, and visitors. School climate refers to a school’s social, physical, and academic environment, with emphasis on how these elements impact the way people feel and whether they feel welcomed. Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs (Cauley, 2009) suggests the base of an institution is safety and security. School climate is predicated on staff and student’s belief that the institution will provide these essential human aspects. It is important to create a setting where students feel comfortable and motivated to learn and teachers feel respected and encouraged to do their job. When a student feels his or her teacher cares—not only about academic capital, but also about social capital—the student will gain a higher sense of self-worth and self-esteem. When an educator feels like a valuable contributor to the team, he or she will be eager to put forth the best effort.
Research (Benninga, 2010; Bigler, 2008; England, 2009) shows that, while a number of studies exist about character education and its impact on improved academic performance, this resulting from decreased school-wide discipline problems in general, only a limited number of studies exist relative to perceived impact of character education programs on school climate and behavioral change of middle school students in urban settings (Mosser, 2006).

Therefore, a further study may be needed to explore perceived impact of character education programs on changes in school climate. While theoretically possible, according to the scholar-practitioners (Burke, 2008), changing an organization culture is not an easy task. Organizations behave like “living organisms” with deeper “interaction between its external [and internal] environments” (p. 19). Therefore, an organization, irrespective of the nature of the business, “is not a closed system, a fact that encourages viewing it as an open and flexible entity” (p. 19). In the same vein, studies show that transforming schools to adopt new business practices is not easy because any changes in school mission, goals, or objectives require deep organizational change. Admittedly, “a deep organizational change, especially attempting to change the culture of organization, is difficult” (Burke, 2008, p. 11).

Consequently, although the results of a this qualitative study may not be generalized to apply to another setting due to its unique nature, the outcomes of such study may help broaden the perspectives of educators, policy makers, and community leaders in their effort to further improve student behavior in public schools. Furthermore, the study’s outcomes can help further expand safe and effective learning environments by helping schools adopt to their changing organizational culture.
The Significance Statement

Although many states since 1990 have passed legislation mandating school-wide character education programs in public schools, it remains unclear to what extent such programs impact students’ behavioral change and the overall school culture and climate (Bigler, 2008; England, 2009). Both skeptics and stakeholders call for more studies to examine further the impact of character education programs on school climate despite consensus that students need to learn positive character traits in order to get along with others (Benninga, 2006; England, 2009). Positive behavior may encourage students to attend school, stay focused, work hard and learn more, all while feeling safe and comfortable inside the school.

Furthermore, considering human beings are social creatures who can only survive in society, educational physiologists believe teaching relational virtues of respect, fairness, civility, and tolerance at an early age in human development will play an important role in shaping children’s future behaviors (Cauley, 2009). Berkowitz and Bier (2004) believe character education is associated also with academic motivation and aspirations, pro-social behavior, democratic values, character-reasoning maturity, responsibility, respect, self-efficacy, self-control, self-esteem, social skills, and trusting and respecting teachers—all of which are important tenets of school climate conducive to whole child development.

In addition, fostering a positive school climate aids school improvement efforts by encouraging collaboration among faculty and staff and motivating students to engage in the learning process. School climate reflects many variables that inform relationships between the interconnected circles of student, staff, administrators, and policymakers. A number of these variables of particular importance for this study are the social, emotional, ethical, and academic dimensions of a child’s education. Character education promotes social-emotional competencies
and ethical beliefs through “interventions designed to create a safe, caring, participatory, and responsive school” (Cohen, 2006, p. 209). These competencies and beliefs are foundational to a school’s climate. Berkowitz and Bier (2004) identify school climate as the critical mediating factor of effectiveness of a school’s character education program. With support from the National Association of Elementary School Principals, researchers have identified three dimensions of school climate as physical, social, and academic. Therefore, school climate can be defined as a measure of the positive and/or negative feelings about school environment.

If a further study suggests a positive correlation between character education programs and perceived school climate (safe and caring environment), it would then seem to follow that character education would be positively related to school climate. Cohen (2006) reinforced this when he said, “Evaluating school climate can be a powerful first step that forces us to question the basis of what we are doing” (p. 213). Proper examination and evaluation of school climate is essential for school administrators to be able to concentrate on areas needing improvements. A rapid way to evaluate school climate is to administer a climate survey separately to staff, students, parents, and administrators. Administrators have used this method to collect ideas about the need of implementing some kind of character education (Peterson & Skiba, 2001).

With this age of globalization, the old monotonic fabric of communities has been dramatically transformed into ultra-pluralistic structures in which societies trend toward common democratic values. Reflecting the same pluralistic nature of societies, our classrooms are becoming more diverse than ever before (Cauley, 2009). A character education program based on universal values endeavoring to construct a shared civil society without privileging the particular values of any one group is beneficial for public schools to establish and maintain a harmony between society and schools.
As is the case of any business organization, schools too are required to respond positively to the changes of internal and external environment. According to Benninga (2006), while implementing character education programs correlates positively with safe school environments that foster both academic and social skills, school leaders must respond to the change by also modifying the school’s mission, goals, and objectives so that the school can transform itself into one driven by character education.

**The Audience**

Nevertheless, character education is not a stand-alone program; rather, it should be integrated into the fabric of school-wide curriculum. Benninga (2006) confirms that implementing character education programs contributes to the efforts of behavioral change of students while creating safe schools and community. If more researchers demonstrate the same correlation between character education and school climate, then it is likely that more schools would accept the challenge of allocating more resources and paying as much attention to character education as they do worrying about increasing standard test scores. In addition to administrators and policymakers, teachers would benefit from this change by being able to maximize time on teaching and learning rather than classroom management. Most important, students and parents would benefit as character education helps students acquire social capital. Lastly, by transforming themselves into institutions driven by character education that fosters civility, respect, trustworthiness, work ethic, and dialogue, schools might encourage community leaders and educational entrepreneurs (public or private) to invest in educational choice. Community investment in education could result in more efficient use of taxpayer dollars.
Positionality Statement

The constant struggle between our ideals, preconceptions, biases, and realities of existing conditions is what makes each of us perceive our surroundings and events differently from one another. As a scholar-practitioner, I find value in assessing and reflecting on how my demographic and ideological biases not only have influenced my perceptions of character education and its effectiveness, but also have helped me understand how those perceptions have influenced my view of others.

Researchers are expected to consider both the similarities and the differences between themselves and research participants; that is, researchers often hold views and opinions about their given field of study and the nature of their prospective research participants. As Machi and McEvoy (2009) posit, “These preconceptions, [and] personal attachments . . . present both plusses and minuses to the research effort” (p. 19). As a researcher, I agree with their postulate that my personal attachments, while providing me passion and motivation, can simultaneously pose a soft trap of falling victim to my own attachments and biases. Instead of being open-minded, and at risk of being skeptical toward research data, as the authors predicted, I may “jump to a conclusion rather than arrive at a conclusion after methodical scholarly work” (p. 19).

Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013) write, “positionality reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study” (p. 71). In addition, Cohen and Manion (2011) posit that positionality is typically identified by describing the researcher in relation to the three core tenets of a research project—self, self in relation to others (subject and participants), and from self to system (theory and practice) (pp. 71–73). How these three core tenets of research apply to me, the researcher for this study, are discussed below.
Self

With regard to demographics, I am a white male from a middle-class, Turkish family. I am the only person in my family who has achieved an advanced college degree. I have inherited strong Turkish national and moderate Islamic values. Starting out as a high school chemistry teacher, I have been in the field of education for 22 years, moving into the higher education sector as professor and dean for 15 years, and, most recently, serving as vice-president of a small college in Washington, DC.

Self in Relation to Others

Although I come from a male-dominated society (who defines what is right, wrong, good, and bad in family life), my long history in the field of education as both a teacher and an administrator has led me to believe there are multiple realities in human life. That is, I believe realities are situational and context-bound. Particularly in social sciences, the term objectivity is often replaced with “emerging realities,” and “knowledge is conveyed provisionally and a reality is being socially constructed” (Creswell, 2009).

My worldview is that life is not and can never be a product of coincidence. Because of the complex harmony in nature from micro- to macro-systems, the perfection found in diverse creation, and the balance and purposeful linkage between all creatures and the universe, I conclude this perfection and harmony in variation cannot be simply a product of coincidental creation. Furthermore, I also believe the human being, with its ability to think, process, act, utilize, and alter the environment, as the sole beneficiary of the universe, is the central and single purpose behind the entire creation of the creator. Therefore, my worldview makes me adopt a Kaleidoscope approach, which affords me to deploy all-inclusive lenses with multiple colors to make life more meaningful, reflective, reflexive, and acceptable, particularly when analyzing and
interpreting social events. In my opinion, social life in the world is interpretive in nature as are the realities that we, the scholar-practitioners, attempt to identify.

My interest in this subject, character education, began during my first year of teaching high school Chemistry where affluent students showed little or no respect to new teachers, especially to female teachers. I spent countless numbers of hours trying to communicate, understand, and develop more civic attitudes, yet their unruly behavior continued each time a new teacher joined the family. This experience led me to believe age matters, and students should be introduced to character education earlier in life for them to fully internalize these civic values. The middle school I chose as the research site for my thesis has been implementing formal character education since 2012. My relationship with this school dates back to 2011 when I helped them design and implement STEM curriculum based on Maryland State Standards on Education. Therefore, it serves as a fine venue for me to analyze and assess perceptions of teachers and administrators about the perceived impact of character education on school climate.

**From Self to the System**

Foote and Bartell (2011) argue, “The positionality that researchers bring to their work . . . may influence what researchers may bring to research encounters, their choice of processes, and their interpretation of outcomes” (p. 46). Self-reflection is a reflexive process requiring clear acknowledgement and acceptance of a researcher’s own values, beliefs, and biases, which is essential in helping researchers identify their position on a given space, time, and event. Reflexivity entails self-reflection, self-assessment, clear consciousness about one’s own position, and consideration of how this position informs research design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of emerging trends.
Researcher Bias

While personal biases, preconceptions, and positions cannot be eliminated, they must be controlled with diligence. In an attempt to control my own bias and personal attachments, I plan to start with first identifying and analyzing the various dimensions of my own positionality.

Briscoe (2005) posits three dimensions of positionality as “demographic positioning within society, ideological positioning, and discursively positioning of others and oneself” (pp. 31–32). Because the school I chose as my research site is over 90% African-American, I will be conducting my research among multiple dimensions of positionality. Demographic positioning seems to be the most relevant self-awareness factor as it influences the way I perceive and understand how people of color internalize character traits that are integrated into the fabric of a curriculum designed and implemented for the white, middle-class, main stream population.

From this consideration, in order to better assess my bias and find means to control it, first I plan to conduct a self-actualization stress test about my own cultural heritage, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status, as these are factors most often alluded when referencing the other participants in my study. In this regard, Fennel and Arnot (2008) identify an underlying factor in which “questions of representation must deal with who speaks for whom as much as with what is being said” (p. 534). Second, while stepping on top of my own bias, I plan to assess the cultural heritage and historical landscape of my research participants. To this end, I will be looking into “the questions of how do the race, class, gender and cultural background influence how [my] research participants view and understand the world” (Carlton Parsons, 2008, pp. 1133–1137).

Assessing the ideological dimension of my personal positioning as a scholar, I concur with Briscoe (2005) that I support an inclusive, rather than exclusive, representation of others (p.
In addition to inheriting a wealth of social capital, I have inherited intellectual capital and an open-minded worldview based on universal values and global citizenship as the main ingredient. For instance, I find inspiration in Mawlana Rumi (http://rumi.neu.edu.tr/rumireview.html) who espouses unconditional love for all creatures in respect to an almighty creator. Rumi’s famous statement, “Come, come to me whoever you are as there is a seat on my heart for you,” compels me to believe in an inclusive approach by which I intend to empathize with different worldviews, ideologies, and opinions.

One of the main challenges in the perception of character education in our modern classrooms as they become increasingly multicultural and socially diverse is to decide whose values to integrate into the fabric of curriculum. Particularly within a pluralist classroom setting in our democratic society, educators and psychologists continue to debate about how to construct a shared civil society shaped with universal values without promoting the particular values of any one social or ethnic group. In its simplest definition, character simply refers to a set of social norms and conventions of being “right” or “wrong” in our daily discourse (Nucci, 1997). This multicultural perspective, which recognizes various values, norms, and conventions of modern society and school climate, will be instrumental in helping me control my ideological biases.

As Machi and McEvoy (2009) articulate, “by rationally identifying and controlling these views, [we] can become open minded, skeptical and considerate of research data” (p. 19). Of course, a biased researcher can only produce biased findings, even while the ability to remain objective, leaving behind personal affections, should be the main trait of a researcher. Despite my inherited biases and preconceptions, I believe I will be able to contain the effects of my personal attachments and interpret research results as objective and conclusive as possible because I have assessed my positioning before pursuing the study.
**Theoretical Framework**

Using Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory as my theoretical framework will enable me to study how people learn from one another by observing changing behaviors and how these collective efforts help organization inform its educational practices and overall school climate. Social learning theory highlights and explicate two principal phenomena—child participation in multiple socio-cultural environments and the role of nonfamily adult (teacher) in children’s social development and educational attainment across class and racial strata. In spite of the elusive quality that characterizes the concept of social capital in much of the literature, the present framework defines social capital as consisting of resources and key forms of social support embedded in one’s network (Salazar, 2004).

Eisner (1990) contends that theory attempts to satisfy the need for scientific rationality by providing explanations of observed behaviors relevant to phenomena. However, Bandura (1977) argues that people can learn new information and behaviors by watching other people. The social learning theory advocates that individuals, especially children, imitate or copy modeled behavior from personally observing others, the environment, and mass media (Jeffery, 1990). Basic tenets of this theory are as follows. First, children can learn through observation. Next, internal mental states are an essential part of this process. Third, simply learning information or a behavior does not guarantee behavioral change (Bandura, 1977). Social learning theory says, “behavior is developed through observation and modeling. While much of the knowledge and values that students hold are implicit and unspoken, it is important to help students articulate and make explicit their knowledge, values, planning, and commitment so that their behavior is more intentional” (Huitt, 2004, p. 8–9).
The Institute for Character Education Partnership (CEP, 2012) offers guidelines for educational leaders to develop character traits, such as respect, responsibility, and integrity. To this end, researchers agree learners need to:

- know and think about character traits, ethical values, and knowledge,
- feel and value positive character traits,
- commit and plan to use these character traits and core ethical values,
- have opportunities to act upon their plans, thus behaving with character using their social and emotional skills, and

Table 1.1. Ways of influencing behavior. Adapted from Character Education Partnership (CEP, 2012).
The outer ring of Table 1.1 describes ways behavior is influenced (i.e., through modeling, observation, practice, and behavioral consequences). Humans develop character within the social context of their community (Kohlberg, 1984), which consists of family, peers, class, school, neighborhood, and beyond. While the family is the core system in which children develop their character attributes, the school community provides another setting for building social and emotional competence. It takes a family and a village to raise a child with character. Within the school and classroom community, behavioral development is nurtured by providing students with opportunities to discuss issues, develop rules and norms, solve problems, share their perspectives, practice prosaically behaviors, and plan activities. Providing students with volunteer opportunities in community service projects can provide another dimension of the community context. Any behavioral development effort must consider also the learner’s cultural context in order to ground learning and make learning relevant and meaningful.

**Research Method**

Because I will be studying character education and its perceived impact on school climate as a result of student behavioral changes and staff experiences in their natural school settings, a qualitative research design will be the most appropriate method to conduct this research. Qualitative research design enables me to observe interactions, and identify and interpret relationships between teachers and students in an unthreatening environment. This design involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, meaning a “qualitative study examines things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to researchers” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3).

Creswell (2007) defines case qualitative approach as “a research tradition in which the researchers explore a social phenomenon through in-depth data collection process, such as
observation, interviews, field notes, records, and historical documents” (p. 73). Qualitative study aims to offer insights into how a person makes sense of a given phenomenon based on actual lived experiences. At its core, qualitative study involves thorough examination of lived experiences and meaning-making processes in a given content and context. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) posit that interview methodology is a common denominator of all qualitative studies because interviewing seems to be the universal mode of systematic social inquiry (p. 1). Because this study will explore teachers’ perceptions about the impact on school climate of character education after implementation, the interview study methodology appears to be better suited for this dissertation. It offers a platform where knowledge and meaning are socially constructed between the researcher and interviewees during the interview process.

According to Creswell (2007), because qualitative study focuses on event(s) such as cases, programs, institutions, individuals with unique case, and factors that impact the subjects in its environment though a bound system, the intention is not to generalize the findings, but to provide a holistic approach in especially collective or multiple case studies that aim to identify repeated, or replicated, logic between cases to gain more and broader perspectives over these events, thus enabling researchers to deploy deductive inquiry.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Literature Review

The preliminary purpose of this section is to review a selection of current literature that explores the relationship between school-wide character education programs and perceived positive change in school climate. This literature review will focus on character education, school climate, and the delicate relationship between the two, as well as the impact of character education programs relevant to the study. Also, the two main arguments surrounding the study, the discovery argument and the advocacy argument, are explained in detail to create a background and context for the study.

The organizational pattern used for the literature analysis is to present the relevant concepts and find intersections and correlations that provide a rich description of the context in which the study takes place. Thus, this literature review will include the following sections: Explanation of the discovery argument and relevant concepts, such as character education, school climate; change in educational organizations; the complicated nature of influencing character; and the advocacy argument, described to provide the gap in the literature. These sections coalesce after a thorough analysis of literature on character education and its influencing factors.

The Discovery Argument

This section begins by defining in detail the terms character education and school climate. In addition, this section explores how change occurs in educational institutions and how prior research in the field explains influences on children’s character. This is the historical aspect of how these facts and features evolved and how they created the need or gap in the literature for such study.
**Character Education**

Benninga (2010) defines character education as an umbrella term referring to “the education of children in a manner where the learning process will help them develop as socially-acceptable, well-mannered human beings” (pp. 2–3). The Character Education Partnership (CEP) defines formal character education as “a national movement creating schools that foster growth of ethical, responsible, and caring young people by modeling and teaching good character through emphasis on universal values that we all share.” CEP further stated, “The goal of a good character education program is to help schools create a safe, caring, and inclusive learning environment for all students where they can develop socially, emotionally, ethically, and academically” (2012). Character education may also be defined in terms of “relationship virtues” (e.g., respect, fairness, civility, tolerance), “self-oriented virtues” (e.g., fortitude, self-discipline, effort, perseverance), or a combination of the two (Benninga, 2010). Several studies in the field proffer a broader and comprehensive definition of character education by suggesting the fundamental purpose of character education is to help students develop pro-social, emotional, cognitive, and ethical behavioral abilities.

School is no longer a place where students can learn only how to read and write. Instead, it is and should be a place where they are equipped with necessary social, emotional, and cognitive skills to be life-long learners and responsible, participating citizens (Glanzer & Milson, 2006; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). Given that humans are social beings who can prosper only in society, relational virtues of tolerance, civility, respect, justice, and fairness, in addition to self-oriented virtues, play an important role in shaping behaviors so an individual is acceptable to society. Definitions of character education programs vary somewhat;
consequently, programs identified as “character education” programs may vary in purpose, scope, and methods of implementation.

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1894) considered man “the masterpiece of creation,” writing, “No profession [teaching] on earth calls for a deeper understanding of human nature, nor for greater skill in guiding it properly” (pp. 32–33). Human beings develop both biologically and intellectually by travelling through different stages of life, each with its own requirements for optimal growth. As Rousseau wrote in his *Emile* (1972), “Nature would have them children before they are men,” adding, “If we try to invert this order we shall produce a forced fruit immature and flavorless, fruit which will be rotten before it’s ripe” (p. 62).

Therefore, human beings cannot be programmed to act in certain way, but they can be educated gradually and incrementally to become better humans (Piaget, 1964). Likewise, Horace Mann, the great nineteenth-century school reformer, confirms that helping children to develop good character is not a quick fix but a product of a continuous process of intentional teaching and role modeling in everyday discourse (Mondale & Patton, 2001). Professor Robert E. Slavin (2009) agrees, “For a number of years now a character education movement has sought solutions to what many in the public perceive as a decline in the character traits of the nation, in general, and of young people specifically” (p. 54). Moreover, Theodore Roosevelt once said, “To educate a person in mind and not in character is to educate a menace in society” (England, 2009, p. 4). From these great minds, it is logical to conclude character education instills virtues in children prompting them to think twice before acting.

In summary, character education in the aforementioned sense is both a social movement presenting itself in the formal educational arena and a cognitive stage shaping the development of children at certain phases in their lives. In addition to the description and benefits this concept
brings to the argument, it is essential to answer questions related to the how, where, and who, which is addressed in the next section.

**School Climate**

The school climate determines how students’ cultural values are shaped and is an integral part of the character building process. Therefore, it is imperative to define and examine the meaning of this concept in detail.

According to the National School Climate Council (NSCC), *school climate* refers to “the quality and character of school life as it relates to norms and values” based on “interpersonal relations and social interactions, and organizational processes and structures” (n.p.). School climate (environment) sets the tone for all learning and teaching practices, and is predictive of students’ ability to learn and develop in healthy ways. (NSCC, 2015). Research indicates a positive correlation between school climate and school success, which translates into various indicators of success, “such as increased teacher retention, lower dropout rates, and decreased incidences of violence, and higher student achievement” (NSCC, 2015, n.p.)

Based on empirical research in the field, NSCC (2015) also argues “a sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing and satisfying life in a democratic society” (n.p.). Furthermore, NSCC (2015) suggests climate comprises the following:

- Norm, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe,
- People that are engaged and respected,
- Students, families, and educators working together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision,
• Educators modeling and nurturing attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning, and
• Each person contributing to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment.

Based on the various school climate research, the NSCC (2015) also identifies four major areas that school climate assessment needs to include—safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the external environment.

Several empirical studies (Stevens & Sanchez, 1999; Anderson, 1982) indicate a positive correlation between school climate and formal character education programs in that the majority of these character education programs focus on developing not only self-oriented virtues, but also relationship-oriented virtues. These two types of virtues affect the overall feeling and perception of a school to the various internal and external moving parts of organizational operations. Because school climate reflects many variables influencing internal and external ethos of school climate, many studies have tried to capture the tenets of the cause-effect
relationship of school climate (Anderson, 1982). While these studies relied on the support of three major theories—input and output, sociological, and ecological, the most influential one, ecological theory, provided researchers a much broader perspective as it encompasses a combination of input-output theory and socio-cultural components of sociological theory. Anderson (1982) posits that ecological theory examines how the school functions with all internal and external variables, each of which could be modified.

In short, school climate is a complex organizational system deliberately implemented on the educational organization. The goal of school climate is to provide the context in which students’ learning experiences are shaped in the hopes of providing a positive output. These organizational decisions and contexts are often the result of extensive planning and decision making that often cause fundamental systemic changes. Nevertheless, an established system with multiple stakeholders cannot implement change easily or without a period of chaos; therefore, certain strategies are utilized to ease this tumultuous period. The next section provides examples of these strategies and explores realistic expectations to implementing change on complex systems.

**The Complicated Nature of Influencing Character**

Harvard professor Rick Weissbourd wrote, “The character development of a student does not depend primarily on explicit character education efforts but on the maturity and ethical capacities of adults with whom they interact” (Benninga, 2006, p. 11). Therefore, whether cognizant or unconsciously, children interacting with adults (parents, relatives, and others) develop and shape their own character virtues. Spending nearly eight hours a day, five days a week in school, a student inevitably is affected the most by teachers. What teachers and staff bring to their relationships with students plays a major role in the development of children’s
character, as teachers and staff are viable role models during daily interaction with their students (Slavin, 2009). Professor Slavin (2009) further suggests, “We will never greatly improve students’ character development in schools without taking on the complex task of developing adults’ maturity and ethical capacities” (p. 54). In an article entitled “Moral Teachers, Moral Students,” Weissbourd (2003) stated that schools can best support students’ character development by helping teachers manage the stresses of their profession and by increasing the teachers’ capacity for reflection and empathy towards their students. Larry Nucci (1997), a professor of education at the University of Illinois, indicates that psychologists and educators are still debating how to better plan, implement, and evaluate character education in order to improve educational practices and promote positive societal change.

During the formation of America’s republic, prevailing thought claimed that religious indoctrination would develop the character of a child. However, with the separation of church and state in the late 1800s, the educational system initiated nonsectarian public school reforms. As society evolved and classrooms started cherishing ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, educators and policymakers started creating new legislation and policies to integrate civic education based on universal values, rather than promoting any one religious belief system. Due to a shift of focus from a national to a universal value system, “between 1993 and 2004, 23 states passed new character education laws” (England, 2009, p. 6), which integrated primarily universal values into the fabric of school curriculum.

The Advocacy Argument

A survey of character legislation and its implementation at the national scale showed that, while as many as 26 states have passed some form of related legislation (Glanzer & Milson, 2006), some kind of character education is already being taught throughout all fifty states
(Prestwich, 2004). Starting in the 1990s, numerous states developed legislative polices mandating character education in the daily school schedule. For example, Alabama was one of the first states to institute mandatory, ten-minute, daily character education programs in public schools (England, 2009, pp. 8–9). Reinforcing the beliefs of many, such as civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who strongly believed in the 1960s that “intelligence plus character . . . is the goal of true education” (England, 2009, p. 7), these programs taught issues such as patience, courtesy, tolerance, forgiveness, coexistence, loyalty, and honesty. Designed to explore the relationships between character education programs and perceived change in school climate, this study will also be guided by the following descriptive and relational questions. First, what are the perceptions of middle school teachers regarding a school-wide character education program as related to change in the relationship between students, staff, and parents? Second, what are the perceptions of teachers about the impact, if any, of character education programs on school climate that helped them modify school functions for the betterment of schooling?

The Center for Social and Emotional Education (CSEE) (2015) identifies their goal “to promote positive and sustained school climate” (n.p.). Merle J. Schwartz, Director of Education and Research at the Character Education Partnerships, wrote on the CEP website (2014) that when looking at emerging topics in character education, “as quality character educators, we shine our flashlights on three major areas” (n.p.). Therefore, it can be argued that school climate and culture as related to character education are two emerging areas. With speculations about the benefits of character education and its perceived impact on school climate and culture, character education and school climate dominate much of the discussion today around child education, even as new generations learn to embrace global color-line differently.
In summation, the literature reveals many reasons and techniques associated with implementing character education as a positive method in raising morally responsible, trustworthy youth. Many concepts are explored individually in the literature. As the many aspects of character education are discussed, a gap in the literature is formed that brings these concepts together as a whole in providing a resource for educators.

The literature review among various studies reveals that research conducted by Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, and Smith (2006) was one of the most comprehensive yet conclusive studies examining the relationship between school-wide character education programs and observed behavioral change of students. Their primary objective was to examine quantitatively the relationship between observed behavioral change of students and formal character education implemented in a number of selected California elementary schools.

According to Benninga et al. (2006), California revised in 2002 its “School Recognition Program” to include explicit references to implementation of character education into the valuation rubric. Schools planning to apply for the state recognition award were to demonstrate a successful implementation of some kind of formal character education built into the fabric of their curriculum. This same study also reveals among the 5,368 public elementary schools in California, only 681 of them applied for the California School Recognition Program (CSRP) award.

England (2009) conducted another study to determine the level of perceived impact of character education program on behavioral change of pupils in California public schools. In her research, Dr. England invited principals and teachers of 27 schools to participate in an online survey (quantitative). She conducted follow-up telephone interviews (qualitative) to address missing links and gaps in an attempt to obtain a full assessment of implemented character
education programs. As a result of her examination of both quantitative and qualitative data by deploying descriptive mixed-method design, she discovered teachers and principals believe that a “character education program is an important element that must be included in all public schools in California to increase student achievement and facilitate a safe and effective learning environment” (England, p. 119).

Character Education Partnership (CEP) (n.d.) is a national advocacy group based in Washington, D.C. whose mission it is “to have quality character education in all schools and build a nation of ethical citizens who pursue excellence in all areas of their lives” (n.p.). In order to help schools develop students of good character for a just and compassionate society, CEP (n.d.) developed the following eleven principles:

1. Promotes core ethical values as the basis of good character.
2. Defines “character” comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and behavior.
3. Uses a comprehensive, intentional, proactive, and effective approach to character development.
4. Creates a caring school community.
5. Provides students with opportunities for socially acceptable action.
6. Includes a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them to succeed.
7. Strives to foster students' self-motivation.
8. Engages the school staff as a learning community that shares responsibility for character education and attempts to adhere to the same core values that guide the education of students.
9. Fosters shared character leadership and long-range support of the character education initiative.

10. Engages families and community members as partners in the character-building effort.

11. Evaluates the character of the school, the school staff's functioning as character educators, and the extent to which students manifest good character.

According to the CEP (2012), effective character education must be implemented through a holistic approach, known as “whole school reform,” which integrates character development into every aspect of school life. A distinct feature of the holistic model is its emphasis on “building a caring community” among students “by fostering cooperation and collaboration over competition, by stressing discipline and classroom management based on problem-solving techniques rather than on rewards and punishments, and by favoring a democratic student-centered teaching approach over the old teacher-centered traditional classroom model” (CEP, n.d., n.p.).

CEP (n.d.) also cites the following examples of research that found character-based programs to be effective:

- A 2000 evaluation of South Carolina’s character education program found that 91 percent of administrators in schools implementing the program reported an 89 percent improvement in behavior, a 60 percent improvement in academic achievement, and a 65 percent improvement in student, teacher and faculty attitude (Character Education Partnership, 2012).

- A study of four schools using Positive Action (http://www.positiveaction.net/), a character education program, reported that the number of behavioral incidents at
the four schools resulting in the referral of students to higher authority for discipline declined by 80 percent during a seven year period. The schools also saw significant improvement in other areas, including reduced absenteeism and improved scores on achievement tests.

- An evaluation of students who had received Second Step violence prevention program (http://www.cfchildren.org) training found that they were less likely to engage in either hostile physical or verbal behavior and were more likely to take part in friendly social interactions with their peers than students who had not received the training.

- Longitudinal studies from the Responsive Classroom program (responsiveclassroom.org), which emphasized social skills and good character, have reported improved academic performance across several grade levels. Furthermore, participation in the Responsive Classroom program has resulted in above average academic growth for students in grades four through eight as well as in a decrease in discipline referrals and an increase in pro-social behavior.

**The gap**

Although many studies explored the relationship between character education and academic performance or discipline problems in public schools, relatively few studies specifically examined the relationship between character education and its perceived impact on school climate as reflected by teachers’ perceptions as an overarching scope of work. As also mandated by the NCLB Act of 2002, while state and federal governments stress the importance of character and climate in schools, this dissertation is also aimed at examining the relationship
between character education and school climate to identify and describe a correlation, if any, that might exist between them.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, research indicates character education promotes pro-social, emotional, and ethical behavior by creating safe, caring, loving, participatory, and responsive school climate (Cohen, 2006). In this perspective, many researchers consider “school climate as the critical mediating factor of how effective a school’s character education would be” (Lori, 2010, p. 10). Therefore, one could easily argue that if character education promotes safe and caring school environments, and if school climate is a measure of overall positive and/or negative feelings about school environment, then a positive correlation between character education and school climate exists. Evaluating a school climate, usually by administering some kind of school climate survey assessing the harmony between students, staff, and parents, is the first step in analyzing the tenets of various moving parts of school climate that need improvement. This provides a unique opportunity for educators to propose new ideas and programs including the implementation of some kind of character education program (Lori, 2010).

Educational organizations mirror societal values as well as produce them. Schools are considered social systems for many reasons. The roles within the structure of society are established at schools with a commitment to the values of society. Schools exist within the society; therefore, they model society. If we want to create a society with good character values, we must start from the structural elements of educational organizations. We expect schools and societies to reflect each other, not just in terms of subjects taught, but also in terms of school organization and cultural functioning. Since educational institutions are complex, implementing change in the school climate must be considered to improve education in general. Especially in a
multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society like America, the values and behaviors of society-at-large do not always reflect those values and behaviors of any one group. Therefore, creating unity and communicating school vision carries the utmost importance even before implementing any changes to the organization. It is important for the survival and passing of the ever-changing social system to the next generations (Capper, 1993; Hanson, 2003; Adler, 1991; Robbins & Judge, 2013). As Charles Darwin once pronounced, “It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.”
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Methodology

The purpose of this dissertation research is to explore teachers’ perceptions of the effectiveness and impact of character education on school climate. Therefore, the overarching question remains, “How do teachers understand and describe character education based on their lived experiences?”

Among different research approaches, a qualitative research method is best for answering this question. A qualitative research method, such as an interview study, offers better tools to attempt to rationalize phenomena in terms of meanings that people bring to the researcher, and to provide a holistic approach to studying perceptions of people, groups, and culture in their natural settings (Machi & McEvoy, 2009). According to Holstein and Gubrium (1995), interview study is a common data collection methodology, perhaps the oldest method used in all social science studies. In this type of study, researchers ask a series of formal and informal questions to interviewer to elicit knowledge based on the respondent’s lived experiences. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) posit, “respondents are not so much repositories of knowledge-treasuries of information awaiting excavation” (p. 4). Holstein and Gubrium (1995) emphasize knowledge is socially constructed in collaboration with interviewers during the interview process where both parties engage in a meaning-making process. The authors also suggest that those who are curious about exploring another person’s feelings or experiences should simply ask the right set of questions to uncover information about another’s interpretive realities. Interview study is essentially a search-and-discovery mission. Primary concern is with maximizing the flow of reliable information based on lived experiences while minimizing distortion of what the respondent knows (p. 3).
In addition, because this study will examine teachers’ perception about the impact, if any, of character education on school climate, an interview study as qualitative research approach would provide a better lens in walking between multiple interpretive realities reflected in teachers’ responses. The meaning-making process that unfolds in the interview is a complex, context-bound activity (Robbins, 2000). A qualitative approach consistently can express this complexity along with an approach to knowledge as the knowledge conveyed provisionally and a reality is being socially constructed (Creswell, 2009). That is to say, “understanding how the meaning-making process unfolds in the interview is as critical as apprehending what is substantively asked and conveyed (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 4). The key point here is to design questions and provide an atmosphere conducive to open and undistorted communication so researchers can obtain unadulterated feelings about respondents’ lived experiences. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) explain that the “objective is not to dictate interpretation but to provide an environment conducive to the production of the range of meanings that address relevant issues and not to be confined by predetermined agendas” (p. 17). Furthermore, Smith et al. (2009) suggest qualitative interview methodology can be used to explore lived experiences of people, people’s understanding and beliefs about a phenomenon, and the effect of experiences, attitudes, and life circumstances on human decision and behaviors.

The types of questions included in the interview also determines the kind of information to be collected, as well as methods of research, analysis, and interpretation of data (Creswell, 2009). Considering the design of this interview study as previously discussed, I will be asking several descriptive and relational questions in my interview to further examine a climate change in this study’s middle school, which results from implementation of school-wide character education program.
When completing this interview study, consistent with the tenets of qualitative research, I employed a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm as my philosophical lens to approach the problem by personally understanding the human situations of the subjects, including their views and relationships with other people. Ponterotto (2005) defines a paradigm as a “set of interrelated assumptions about the social world which provides a philosophical and conceptual framework for the organized study of that world” (p. 128). The constructivist-interpretivist qualitative paradigm of inquiry includes the following tenets:

1. Humans generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and their ideas;

2. In contrast to Positivism’s single external objectivity, constructivism posits multiple apprehensible and equally valid realities constructed in the minds of individuals internally (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129);

3. Through process of accommodation and assimilation, individuals construct new knowledge from their experiences; and

4. Dynamic interaction between researcher and participant is central to capturing and describing the “lived experience” of the participant (p. 131).

Therefore, my research would best benefit from the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm of inquiry as my philosophical lens when examining the events, people, and their lived experiences in their natural settings.

**Research Design**

Qualitative research begins with an assumption, a worldview, a theoretical lens claiming a research problem, which investigates the meaning of individuals or groups who ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers employ strategies
different from that of quantitative researchers. First, qualitative researchers work from an emerging qualitative inquiry, rather than starting with a theory decidedly in hand. Qualitative researchers also collect data in natural settings, which are sensitive to people and places of study, as opposed to collecting data from a controlled lab setting like a quantitative study would do. Qualitative researchers employ an inductive, bottom-up approach to data analysis instead of a deductive approach used in the quantitative method. This inductive approach helps establish patterns or themes in the data. The final written report of a typical qualitative research includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of a problem by leveraging various literature in the field. Creswell (2009) posits that while empirical generalization cannot be made, a theory might be generated from the qualitative study tradition.

The qualitative method affords me the best opportunity to studying school climate as perceived by middle school teachers in their natural setting after they are introduced to character education programs. Involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, “qualitative study examines things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to researchers” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3).

**Research Tradition**

According to Holstein and Gubrium (1995), an interview study design should be considered when the focus of the study is to answer *how* and *why* questions. This design also prevents researcher manipulation of the behavior of those involved in the study. In my particular study, I will interview teachers in their natural school settings, preferably at a time and place convenient for them. I will not conduct interviews with students, and data collection will be
minimally intrusive; therefore, participants’ behavior (of teachers) will not be manipulated. This dissertation is going to examine, based on their lived experience, teachers’ perceptions of the impact of school-wide character education programs on school climate in urban middle schools, “a bounded system” (Creswell, p. 73). Because of this, after the implementation (context) of the program, a qualitative interview study seems to be more promising and useful methodology to examine multiple realities unfolding during the interview process.

Holstein and Gubrium (1995) define interview study as “an empirical qualitative inquiry when the main questions are how or why questions, [and] a researcher has little or no control over the behavioral events, and the focus of study is a contemporary as opposed to entirely historical phenomenon (p. 16). Similarly, Creswell (2009) posits a qualitative study offers better tools and instruments when a researcher is to “explore a bound system or multiple bounded systems through in-depth data collection process, such as observation, interviews, field notes, records, and historical documents” (p. 73). Qualitative study paradigm focuses on events, such as cases, programs, institutions, individuals with unique cases, and factors that impact subjects in their environments though a bound system. He explains the intention is not to generalize the findings, claiming no empirical generalization can be made. Rather, he continues, a theory can be generated from a qualitative study because it provides a holistic approach in especially collective or multiple case studies aiming to identify repeated, or replicated, logic between cases to gain perspective over these events, thus enabling researchers to deploy inductive inquiry.

Because I will be exploring teachers’ perceptions of the perceived impact of school-wide character education programs on school climate, I believe a qualitative interview study would offer me the necessary set of tools to seek and capture the meaning of the lived experiences of teachers about school climate. McNamara (1999) posits that, because interviews can pursue in-
depth information around the topic, they are useful tools particularly to search and find the story (interpretive meaning and factual tenets) behind the lived experiences of participants. Therefore, interview methodology within the qualitative study tradition appears to be better suited for this dissertation.

**Participants**

Consistent with a qualitative interview tradition, I will use purposeful sampling strategy to inform an understanding of the perceptions of teachers about the effectiveness of character education programs as it relates to promoting a change in overall school climate. My participants will include approximately 5–6 teachers from a middle school in Maryland with diverse school demographics. Because an interview study is preferable when attempting to conduct in-depth analysis of the events, programs, or other phenomenon in an organization that participants experience, a sample size of 5–6 teachers (approximately 10% of the total teacher population) seems a manageable size for this study given the entire instructional personnel of this particular school. Smith et al. (2009) suggests in-depth interview offers an appropriate venue for the researcher to engage in meaningful conversation with the interviewee while providing an opportunity to the participant to “tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively, and to develop their ideas” (p. 56). Creswell (2009) explains qualitative research tradition, particularly an interview study, requires sample sizes to be small and not necessarily representative of the larger population. Therefore, empirical generalization cannot be made out of the analysis of a qualitative study. As Holstein and Gubrium (1996) suggest regarding this approach, “the rich illustrations repeatedly tell us that interviews are conversations where meanings are not only conveyed but cooperatively built up, received and interpreted” (p. 11).
Several strategies exist for purposeful sampling of information-rich cases. Two methods most commonly utilized in qualitative studies are sampling for semi-structured interview and sampling for a focus group, both of which obtain rich data while establishing and maintaining rapport between researcher and participants. Holstein and Gubrium (1996) suggest, “consciously selecting respondents because they are assumed to be capable of narrative production underscores the theoretical commitment to dignifying and studying interpretive practice” (p. 27).

a. Sampling for Semi-Structured Interview: According to Seidman (2006) and Merriam (2009), while highly structured interview is usually used to obtain demographic data such as the U.S. Census, semi-structured interview is used to collect specific data among rich content such as would be collected in a qualitative interview study. According to Merriam (2009), unstructured/informal interviewing, an open-ended questioning technique, affords researchers to learn from this interview how to formulate questions for the later interview. This open-ended questioning method is used primarily to create a non-threatening comfortable environment in order to collect rich data about the lived experiences, as well as beliefs, emotions, and attitudes of participants. Pre-formulated interview structure, according to Holstein and Gubrium (1996), “may serve as catalyst for respondents’ answer, but myriad other interactional and discursive gestures also provoke and shape responses” (p. 39).

b. Sampling for a Focus Group Interview: Focus group interview procedures provide multiple benefits to the participants. For example, Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) suggests it can be “economical, fast, and efficient” (p. 2) to obtain data, provide cohesiveness among participants, and create environment to make it socially oriented. On the other hand, focus group has many challenges. Since it is a facilitator-driven process, the
moderator needs to be experienced capturing feedback and comments of quieter participants. Focus group has a tendency to favor extroverts if not moderated well, so “inclusion of frequency data” (p. 3) will be helpful to monitor levels of participation from all parties and add value to the qualitative research using focus group. Creating safe environments for participants to present freely their viewpoints and opinions is also critical to conducting a successful focus group. For Holstein and Gubrium (1996), “Interviewer’s questions are not merely stimuli, catalyst for reflex-like production of answers, they are more like framing devices that the respondent might follow in characterizing experience” (p. 29).

As far as the limitation and external validity as it relates to ability to generalize my findings, I feel there are three threats to transferability, which are sample size, lack of random sampling, researcher and teachers’ biases, and diversity of participants. I will be interviewing mainly core subject teachers, who have other administrative duties such as program director, science coach, etc., in the same school, which helps not only to afford me ample time to observe the hidden elements of the internal context during the study, but also to provide a venue for better data triangulation.

**Recruitment and access**

For this study, I have chosen one middle school in Maryland as my research site for the following reasons. First, this school is said to participate in character education as defined in Chapter Two. Second, the convenience and ease of access to the people in the institution (from the board of trustees to labor positions) makes this institution a good candidate for an in-depth interview study. Ease of access is important because without access and compliance to have a research project performed at a school, this project would not have taken place. Third, among the
schools reached out for in this study, the project, size, location, and socio-economic status of this particular school seems representative of many schools in the district, thus providing one aspect of generalizability among the other middle schools in the district.

Selection of the site also depends on the focus of the study; therefore, the first thing I looked for was a school with character education as part of the school mission. The reason I chose a middle school rather than an elementary or high school is the typical age of middle school students is when children start to have social difficulties and adolescence begins to shape certain characteristics.

In addition to the selection criteria mentioned above, convenience also played a role into the school selection process. Located close to me, the middle school is a typical size middle school with administrators applying character education as a part of the education of the students as a whole. Because I have been to the site before and am familiar with the people there, resistance was minimized, which will also decrease the likelihood of being under a magnifying glass while conducting research. People are comfortable having me around and they will be more willing to provide me rich data than would reluctant participants.

I will first get permission from the district as well as the school principal for my study to take place at this particular site. Then, I will attend a staff and teachers meeting to introduce my project, and myself and to ask people to participate. From the ones willing to participate, I will prepare a prospectus of the methodological aspect of the research project.

Furthermore, because the participants of my research study are adult staff members of this school, I will comply with the human subject procedures during this study as specified by the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board Guidelines. I will inform all participants that their participation will be strictly voluntary. The information about the purpose of this study,
level of risk (low to none), the interview process, intended use of the data, requirements of participation, and the ways in which confidentiality will be maintained will also be provided to participants. I will also require them to sign an Informed Consent form (Appendix A).

Participants for this research will not be offered any monetary compensation. Before seeking access to the site and recruiting my participants, a letter to the school’s principals will be sent detailing the purpose, content, process, time, and commitment on their part required to complete this study, as well as who will benefit from this study.

**Data collection**

Typically, qualitative studies draw on multiple sources of evidence. Yin (2014) recommends six types of sources to collect data in conducting qualitative study research as follows: “documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artifacts” (p. 105). Yin (2014) argues no single data collection source has a complete advantage over others; in fact, these various data sources are complementary to each other. Different sources requires different approaches to their interrogation and is likely to yield different kinds of insights. Each source has its strengths and its weaknesses, and the richness of the case study evidence base derives largely from this multi-facetted perspective yielded by using different sources of data collection.

I plan to study the perceptions of teachers about the impact of character education programs on overall school climate in urban middle schools by deploying qualitative interview study methodology. Therefore, interviews and observations, as Merriam (2009) suggests, are the two major data collection strategies I plan to use to gather data in an effort to address my research question. Merriam (2009) uses the term *documents* as an umbrella term to refer to a wide range of written, visual, digital, and physical materials relevant to a study. She writes,
“Documents include just about anything in existence prior to the research at hand” (p. 140). In addition, Butin (2010) writes, “the data that researchers collect will drastically differ depending on the research tools to be deployed” (p. 82). This suggests that, depending on the purpose of the research and nature of data to be collected, different methods and instruments are applied. Therefore, I am planning to use semi-structured interview methodology as a data collection instrument for this study. (See Appendix B for Data Collection Protocol and Interview Questions.)

Semi-structured interview with teachers will facilitate interpretation and understanding of teachers’ perceptions as a result of their lived experiences by using strategies of clarifying information from the informants directly. The interviews will be performed individually in private settings and not in a focus-group environment. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) suggest that in order to maintain neutrality, minimize bias, and, consequently, maximize data integrity, “the interview should be conducted in a private setting not in the presence of others” (p. 11). I anticipate each interview having approximately ten open-ended questions, lasting no more than thirty minutes each.

According to Onwuegbuzie (2009), interview study is a research tool traditionally used to collect qualitative data by involving a small number of people in informal group discussion(s) (pp. 2–3). I plan to orientate my interviewees with a few general questions and gradually move into the main topic by asking open-ended questions while avoiding use of complex, technical, or academic vocabulary. Holstein and Gubrium posit, “Introductory remarks and statements made to ease transitions from one question to another are designed with an eye toward their neutrality” (p. 41). Because transition statements should be considered merely as conversational bridges
between the cluster of questions, more sensitive and focused questions will be asked toward the end of the interview to recap any salient points for an in-depth data analysis.

Using open-ended questions will elicit informants’ points of view; therefore, I will employ certain questioning strategies, such as the ones listed below.

a) Hypothetical questions. These are questions to create a scene to put the informant in that situation. For instance, “Imagine you have the ideal character education in place, what would be some components” (Spradley, 1979; Merriam, 1998).

b) Descriptive questions. These are the most common types of qualitative interview questions where informants are expected to elaborate. For example, asking, “Can you tell me a typical character education principle?” is likely to elicit an elaborate response.

c) Experience question. These kinds of questions ask the participants if they have had any experiences in a particular setting.

Data storage

As the means of data storage, in addition to keeping uncut digital voice files of all interviews in the local hard drives (both personal laptop and home-office computer), a Google virtual drive, along with various e-mail accounts, and cloud applications (Google documents) will be used to store data. All of these digital platforms are password-protected. Not only do they provide a secure environment to protect the integrity of data (multisite access of the same data), but also they afford researcher and participant instant access to the data file from anywhere at any time. A hard copy of all interview documents will be kept in a fireproof file cabinet with limited access control.
In order to ensure maximum confidentiality, data will be coded to remove any identifying information. Participants will assume pseudonyms of their own selection. Actual names of participants will be locked away in a separate location, are not included in this dissertation, and will not be included in any subsequent publications or presentations that may result from this study. Only the researcher has access to the actual identities of the participants.

**Data Analysis**

Although a qualitative study often deploys inductive reasoning, analyzing interview data is not easy due to richness of data, which makes it imperative that researchers occasionally change the lens to deductive reasoning to see the relationship between interconnected elements of character education programs as they relate to reduction of discipline referrals. Typically, my interview study database will include a multitude of evidence from different sources. Data analysis of this rich resource is based on examining, categorizing, and tabulating evidence to assess whether the evidence supports or opposes the initial propositions of the study.

When conducting a qualitative study, irrespective of method of inquiry chosen, coding the data and populating the emergent qualities into categories is a common way to analyze systematically the data collected. During the coding process, Saldana (2008) suggests researchers look for patterns that can be “characterized by similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence, and causation” (p. 6). Immediately following any data collection, a pre-coding process (Saldana, 2008, pp. 16–17) will be initiated by highlighting words, short phrases, and other “codable” moments worth noting. After each pre-coding is done, the first cycle of the coding process will be initiated by deploying “descriptive coding” (p. 3) in an attempt to capture the summative and salient theme in the quote. In addition to open (initial) coding, which may also include in Vivo, a process to attribute coding types, I will utilize axial coding strategies such
as selective and pattern coding to relate categories and subcategories in describing the relationship between character education and school climate in a middle school setting. Stage two of data analysis incorporates a thorough analysis of the preliminary set of codes created during the initial cycle of coding for logical linkages between their properties. The third and final stage of the coding process, the axial coding stage, will explore relationships between the subcategories and categories, to confirm or nullify the logical linkages that might form additional general categories.

**Trustworthiness**

To ensure the trustworthiness of my study and increase the quality of my research findings, I plan to use a number of methods and strategies. In order to increase external validity and credibility of my findings, I plan to interview each teacher individually at a time and place of their choosing to avoid potential intimidation from others. I will also make a conscious effort not to share with others the names and positions of the participant teachers. In order to demonstrate acceptable trustworthiness of my research, a greater explanation of these three issues will provide a larger perspective, and, therefore, a more comprehensive picture of the overall research.

a. **Lack of Random Sampling**: Due to the nature of this interview study, a random sampling is not possible as the groups are pre-established. However, to bolster validity pre- and post-implementation, sampling groups will be used.

b. **Researcher and Interviewees’ Biases**: I need to sharpen my skills in collecting and recording the type of data needed while being aware of own personal biases and biases of the school teachers.
c. Privacy of School Data: Although I try my best to ensure the school administrators in writing that no private data will be collected during this study, generally and naturally school administrators often are reluctant to provide complete school data in a timely and transparent manner.

**Generalizability**

The qualitative research’s main purpose is to understand the social world from the viewpoint of the people included in the study, through rich descriptions of the activities and the environment, and through observable behavior (Wildemuth, 1993). In this context, the idea is not to establish a cause-and-effect relationship; rather, it is to explain phenomenon in a particular time and place (Munhall, 1989). Central to the qualitative worldview is the belief that people give meaning to the world, that their experiences and values exist in a historical and social framework, and that there can be multiple realities (Benoliel, 1984; Tesch, 1990). The value of qualitative research, therefore, does not exist in the generalized, universal lessons or proofs but within the context in which the study takes place. In this project, time, place, and the make-up of the respondents and their experiences establish the rich description, and, therefore, provide an explanation of the phenomenon of character learning from the respondents’ perspectives. Creswell (2009) posits that, while no empirical generalization can be made, a theory might be generated as a result of a qualitative interview study.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Given the importance of ethics in conducting academic research, several safety measures will be employed to comply with the Human Subject Protection regulations and Northeastern University’s IRB guidelines. Prior to interview, participants will be provided a clear explanation of the interview process, ensuring participation is strictly voluntary and providing information
regarding the study’s purpose, level of risk (low to none), intended use of the data, requirements of participation, and the ways in which confidentiality would be maintained.

Data collection will be safe and minimally disruptive, with no physical or psychological distress intended for any individuals. Data will be coded to remove any identifying information. Participants will assume pseudonyms of their own selection. Actual names of participants will be locked away in a separate location, are not included in this dissertation, and will not be included in any subsequent publications or presentations that may result from this study. Only the researcher has access to the actual identities of the participants.

The purpose of my research is to explore the perceived impact of school-wide character education on the school climate and as a result how changing school climate help school transform itself from within. Therefore, part of my research may involve casual observation in natural school and classroom settings of children who are classified as vulnerable participants under CFR46.401–409 due to their limited ability to understand and make best responsible decision about themselves. To this end, I will pay special attention during my research. I will share my observation notes, if I ever take any, with the classroom teacher for each observation and receive his or her input, making sure the student’s privacy and rights are fully protected, disclosing no information that may potentially harm a student’s academic and social welfare.

As clearly described in section 9 of the “Policies and Procedures for Human Research Protection” manual, I will obtain permissions to ensure participants’ rights and benefits are protected during this study. Before I begin my research, I will send a consent form to the administration of school detailing the possible risks, benefits, scope, context, content, and all other processes involved in my research.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis

Research Findings

The overarching question guiding this dissertation was “How do teachers understand and describe character education based on their lived experiences?” The following supporting questions helped the researcher focus further on exploring possible impacts of character education programs and overall school climate. First, what are the perceptions of school teachers and their experiences with character education as they relate to changing school climate? Second, how do teachers utilize the outcomes of character education?

The first part of this chapter describes the research site and the demographic landscape of the county where the study takes place. The second part discusses the data collection procedure and participant information, followed by their story and their perceptions and understanding of the phenomenon based on their lived experiences in this school. The last part of this chapter explores the major themes that emerged from the coding process as a result of analysis of the participants’ responses, and the ways these themes relate to one another.

Data Research Site

The research was conducted in a public middle school—hereafter called IT Academy—located in Prince George’s (PG) County, Maryland. IT Academy represents a demographic profile similar to the county as a whole. At the time of the field study, according to the school principal, the school’s total enrollment was 455 students, of which 47% were female, and 53% were male students. In addition, according to the school principal, approximately 85% of students were coming from African-American families, and the rest were of White and Hispanic origin. Similar racial makeup was visible among teachers and staff, as nearly 80% of the entire
teaching and staff body are African American. Of the 24 subject-matter teachers, 79% were female, and 21% were male.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), PG County, with a population of 863,420, is the second most populous county in Maryland, only second to Montgomery County. Census (2010) also reveals 304,042 households and 203,520 families reside in PG County. The racial makeup of the county was 64.5% black or African American, 19.2% White, 4.1% Asian, 0.5% American Indian, 0.1% Pacific islander, 8.5% from other races, and 3.2% from two or more races. Those of Hispanic or Latino origin made up 14.9% of the population (2010). PG County, in terms of Black or African American population, is the most-populous county in Maryland.

The median income for a PG county household was $71,260 and the median income for a family was $82,580. Males had a median income of $49,471 versus $49,478 for females. The per capita income for the county was $31,215. About 5.0% of families and 7.9% of the population were below the poverty line, including 9.6% of those under age 18 and 6.7% of those ages 65 or over. Of the 863,420 residents, 30.1% of all residents over the age of 25 had graduated from college and obtained a bachelor's degree. 86.2% of all residents over the age of 25 were high school graduates or higher, as opposed to the statewide average of 88.7% (Census, 2010). This data is highly relevant because it adds to the understanding of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of students and teachers as public schools mirror the neighborhoods in which they are located.

Data Collection and Participant Information

Data for this study were collected as results of interviews of four core-subject teachers working in a public middle school (IT Academy) in Prince George’s County, Maryland. In order to increase the validity of the data to be collected, the researcher made a conscious effort to
include teachers in different subject areas, namely one each of Math, Science, Social Studies, and Character Education teachers. All of the four participants were female, three of them were under 35, and one was over 50 years old. Of the four participants, one was a white female, and the others were African-American teachers. Two of the four teachers were career changers with less than 5 years total in teaching.

**Table 4.1: Participants’ Background Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Subject Areas</th>
<th># of Years in Profession</th>
<th># of Years in IT Academy</th>
<th>Other Duties Beyond Teaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 1:</td>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Department Chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Laila</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Curriculum Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hallway &amp; Lunch Duties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 2:</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Science Fair Chair.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Slow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Olympiad Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sea-Perch Captain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 3</td>
<td>ELA + Ch. Ed</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>No Responsibilities Beyond Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Queen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 4</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>STEM Fair Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Sharp</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pull-out Tutor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>After School Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hallway &amp; Lunch Duties</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I interviewed each teacher individually at a time and place convenient for her. Prior to the beginning of the interview, I reviewed the Informed Consent Form (Appendix A) with each teacher, and the interview began only after the teacher signed the form. Teachers were asked ten open-ended questions to elicit their perceptions about character education and its impact on school climate. Each interview took between 20 and 30 minutes as was originally anticipated. The interview questions were divided into three main parts: 1) three questions about the interviewee background, b) the next four questions about their experience with character education, and c) the last three questions about the perceived impact of character education on school climate. (See Appendix B for interview questions and interview protocol.)

Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory was used to help shape the analysis of participants’ responses in this study. Social learning theory emphasizes that individuals, especially children, can learn new information and behaviors by watching and copying other people, typically adults, as they participated in multiple social-cultural environments. Therefore, this theoretical framework offered me a kaleidoscopic lens to examine the relationships between visible and hidden trends reverberated among the responses of participants in an effort to populate emerging categories.

As required by the IRB of the Northeastern University, each participant was assigned a pseudonym (code name) as was the research site to maintain full anonymity and confidentially.

**Teacher 1: Ms. Laila**

Ms. Laila joined the IT Academy four years ago and expressed loving to teach there. During her tenure, not only was she able to excel in teaching, but also, this year she was assigned to be the department chair and curriculum coordinator of the IT Academy. As any other full-time teacher, she also had hallway and lunch duties. She indicated that among the things motivating
her to teach at the IT Academy were school climate, culture, and the support network between teachers. She stated, “The staff and students are awesome. Even when there are problems we work together to get something going.” Furthermore, she indicated, “The staff and the students have a real motivation to learn and to keep improving the school, the climate, and the culture.”

Ms. Laila described character education in her school in terms of relationship virtues and added, “They focus a lot on . . . peer and social interaction.” She indicated that, although she did not review the actual character education curriculum, she could attest, “they also do cover some things that go into citizenship and health education.” She believes that “students are learning good study habits and things like that, especially self-esteem issues,” thus highlighting the fact that character education has also been contributing the self-oriented virtues of students.

Laila believed character education has been making difference in her school in that she has observed students “making some connection between what we [they] are learning, especially in social studies with citizenship.” She also shared that character education is among the factors that “affect student performance in academic subjects.” She believes character education plays a part in achieving IT Academy’s mission, explaining, “Character education is part of our school climate and our culture about making students not only academically strong, but good, global citizens.”

Regarding the effectiveness of character education in her school, she stated, “I don’t see it at the level that it should be.” She expressed a deep desire for a more rigorous course instead of the single, 1-hour, weekly class. Because of this, she believes character education is not a priority in the school, adding, “students tend to treat it as kind of like a third or fourth tier course and it’s not a huge priority.” She thought that being a low priority in the students’ eyes, their character education program has not been effective at the level she expected. She shared, “I
think, sometimes, the way that the course is taught and structured might negatively impact school culture because students often feel frustrated that they’re given work and big assignments in a class that they don’t prioritize.”

Laila did not believe character education is something that solely identifies and separates her school from other schools in the same county. She stated, “Yes, although it’s a part of our curricular delivery, we believe it’s important; however, our focus here tends to be more on mathematics, and science and computer technologies. Those are the things . . . in a way that is different from the county.” However, she considers character education as one of the few driving forces separating her school from the other schools in the county. In her experience, character education is “definitely a leading factor because I do notice that our students, overall, are much better behaved than some of the students that I’ve seen in other schools within this county.”

Laila believes character education has been affecting school climate. She shared, “It has a positive effect on the school climate. I think some of the topics that students discuss positively impact our school climate because it brings issues that affect students, especially adolescent students.” She believes everybody goes through these adolescent challenges, and character education does help “not only to understand those things [challenges] but gives them some tools to manage some of the behaviors and issues that come with this age group.” She indicated, “School climate has been getting better” every year since she started teaching at the IT Academy four years ago. According to Laila, character education provides a venue for staff and students to discuss social issues and problems that come with adolescence without any intimidation, and, therefore, she believes, “it does start to contribute positively how students interact in our school culture.” Regarding tackling issues that come with the adolescent age, she feels, “It’s a great
thing to have students learning about those topics, and learning about themselves, and how they interact with each other, and how they should be working in society and functioning in society.”

Regarding her experience about documenting and evaluating the impact of character education at the IT Academy, she indicated there is no formal way of documenting and evaluating the impact of character education beyond anecdotal feedback exchanges between staff and teachers. She added, “We definitely do share back and forth. These methods [best practices] are working well with these students. We do talk about things like that in a staff meeting.”

Teacher 2: Ms. Slow

Ms. Slow is a career changer who has been teaching at IT Academy for the past three years. Prior to teaching, Ms. Slow worked in the private sector as a chemist. After having obtained her Master’s Degree in Education, she moved into the teaching profession. She taught at another school in the same county prior to joining IT Academy. In addition to teaching, she is the chair of the Science Fair, “The SeaPerch” captain, and Olympiad coordinator. Among the things that motivate her to teach here, she identifies the kids as the primary motivation. The second factor is the “the overall mission of the school is STEM driven, especially with minorities . . . to get students more college-ready in sciences and math.” She added, “That’s a big reason I actually left industry to become a teacher.”

Regarding her experience and understanding of character education at her school, Ms. Slow stated, “The students have positive things to say about it. The teachers do, too.” Ms. Slow believes that because of the character education, “they [students] are talking about emotional issues that may occur. Social issues, dealing with their, I guess, their peers and how they deal with them here.” Based on her experience at the school, she also believes character education has been offering a safe and friendly environment for students to discuss their problems. She shared,
“Students hide their feelings or not share what’s going on, but this class opens that discussion across the board . . . in every class.”

Concurring with Ms. Laila’s experiences, Ms. Slow believes character education has been making a difference in her school highlighting the challenges that come with adolescence transition. Ms. Slow explained, “Because of the age, each year, sixth, seventh and eighth, you see a big difference in maturity, I believe character education definitely plays an important role.” In her assessment, she believes the significance of character education is more visible among African-American students or other minorities as “a lot of race-related conversations arise in this school.” In order to explain her experience with the case further, she added, “Things that have happened in the past, whether it be news-related, whether it be in the school, character education was an outlet for students to express how they felt about those situations.” Bringing up Trayvon Martin’s case, as an example, Ms. Slow shared her experience with how the African-American male population was affected with the news and how the news made students uneasy to talk about race. She believes character education helped the kids at IT Academy more than any other group in that it offered a safe outlet to discuss things like, as she shared, “How does what you see in the news affect you? Does that change you as a person? Does it make you a better person? Were you a bad person to begin with? It helped students put it in perspective.” Ms. Slow also mentioned character education has been helping students gain self-confidence to talk about issues beyond their color line. She explained, “It also made students a little more able to discuss what people that didn’t look like them might be experiencing.” Due to this confidence, Ms. Slow believes that students feel free “to talk about things happening outside the school border as well.” If they did not have character education at her school, Ms. Slow mentioned, things “would have been a lot more difficult,” mainly because “there were teachers who were uneasy having
conversation about it [race related issues].” Her belief and understanding of character education seems to have been shaped by observing the level of maturity of students.

As far as the effectiveness of character education at her school is concerned, Ms. Slow indicated concern about the way the class is structured. She said, “Students feel, at times, it’s a long-winded class. Extra-long, because they are taking it for an extended period of time.” Ms. Laila also expressed this as a matter of concern. Ms. Slow explained, “They [students] need more challenges from the class to make them better human beings,” emphasizing there is always room to improve the quality and effectiveness of character education implemented at her school.

Surprisingly enough, Ms. Slow also highlighted the fact that teachers, as the role models with whom students spend most of their daytime, also need character education. She explained, “Students pick up, especially at this age, well if adults aren’t behaving with good character, decently toward each other. They wonder why they would need to also. There’s always, that’s a human fact.”

Ms. Slow indicated the way character education has been separating her school from other schools in the county is through “the entire school culture . . . . It goes from wearing uniforms to how they present their work and being timely.” She shared that character education “promotes school culture here and does make them [students] stand out from, say, our neighboring schools. You can definitely identify students.” She also believes the level of organizational skills of students was improved by character education, which has been another visible value separating her students from others. She concluded, “That comes down to organization skills . . . dealing with their peers.”

It is the perception of the teachers that character education seems to have been affecting the overall school climate. Ms. Slow from the IT Academy voiced this assertion adding that the
influence is a positive one. She stated, “The newest teacher shared some personal history with some of the students. They had discussions about not assuming things about people without knowing their situation, where they’ve come from.” As an indicator showing how character education has affected school climate, Ms. Slow continued to point out teacher-student relationships as viable examples and added that one of her colleagues told a “troublemaker,” “Look, I can care about you and I can understand that you have life happen to you also. The students were so touched by it that they still talk about it.” Ms. Slow highlighted friendly and conducive school environment as a result of character education implementation, her adding, “We don’t hear any negative talk, which is rare from students. They enjoy it and it makes them think about it. There are some things that are good [at her school].”

Ms. Slow indicated that they have been documenting the impact of character education implementation throughout the staff meetings. Ms. Slow felt proud of her students, as she believed, “They [students] don’t have to speak. It’s their persona, their personality, their politeness. Their ability to speak to adults and answer their questions is uncanny to those in the county.” Sharing her most recent student experience that demonstrated manners, Ms. Slow explained how they behaved during the county science fair where more than 1000 students participated. She shared, “They’re in this large arena and, literally, you could walk down every aisle and pick out our students. They were just humble but also pleasant and then ready to work. Our students stood out and we had such praise throughout the county.” The pride and her attitude was evident in her words, as she continued, “In fact, it led to us bringing on a new teacher who was so impressed. The new teacher asked, ‘Who are those kids?’” Ms. Slow shared that she has been taking regular staff meetings as an opportunity to report, share, and listen to others about the impact of character education. Furthermore, she indicated character education has helped
them modify some of their daily activities. In her example, Ms. Slow mentioned a teacher who implemented a new classroom management strategy where sixth-graders were required to line up at the hallway to meet, greet, and shake hands with their teachers. This practice helped improve teacher-student relationships not only inside the classroom but also outside the class. Ms. Slow witnessed, “They [students] are like seeing their parents.” Something as simple as greetings could be viewed as stepping-stones to building relationships and respect toward one another. Ms. Slow was proud of this little gesture and said, “That helped with character building because now we’ve all implemented where students and teachers greet each other in the hallway. To have greetings exchanged and then you find out some students are just little kids.”

**Teacher 3: Ms. Queen**

Ms. Queen is a senior teacher with over 25 years of experience. She has been teaching at IT Academy for the past three years. Although she brings a wealth of teaching and administrative skills, busy teaching schedule precludes her from assuming any other roles at the academy beyond teaching. Ms. Queen indicated that “to empower the students” and “working with youngsters that can be molded, reshaped, and geared down to the right path, the educational journey” are the sources for motivation for her to teach at IT Academy.

Ms. Queen’s understanding of character education at the school has been that “it is really a spin-off of manners and socialization, their [students’] social skills, self-esteem, self-improvement and overall proper etiquette.” By “proper etiquette,” she meant helping students gain necessary skills to “govern themselves accordingly, how to speak, when to speak, etc.” Additionally, she believes “character education in this school would fall under the umbrella of life skills.” She shared the importance of character education as it related to “equipping students with skills they needed to survive in society,” and she indicated that character education does so
by helping them “to grow physically, mentally, morally, spiritually down the right path.” Her choice of examples and attitudes indicated a connection between character education and life skills in that character education positively associated with internalizing good life skills virtues.

Based on her experience, Ms. Queen believes character education has been making difference at her school, concurring with the experiences of Ms. Laila and Ms. Slow. Ms. Queen shared that the first year she joined the academy she noticed “a lot of students that did not have manners,” adding, “but I’ve seen an improvement. I can’t say 100 percent because it has not been 100 percent, but you take baby steps in order to get to the giant steps.” She mentioned that character education “has made a big improvement with the quality of their [students’], and hence “impacted their [students’] lives” at the school. Ms. Queen further explained her experience with character education as it relates to nurturing relationship virtues. She expressed, “I can see an impact between the student and the peers. I see a different type of impact from the student to the adults, the teachers. The way they talk to their peers is one way, the way they associate and talk to a teacher is a different way.” In addition to relationship virtues, similar to what Ms. Laila shared, Ms. Queen believes character education also helps students build on their self-oriented virtues by giving them requisite “motivation to improve their character, their self-esteem, their honesty, positivity, developing a can-do attitude, then they can strive to become anything that they desire to be.” She explained character education is there to help teachers build the foundation on students which then provides students “a structure to build upon, then things fall into place and it makes it a lot easier” for students to overcome any social or academic challenges. Ms. Queen’s examples further suggested a positive relationship between character education and motivation and manners of students.
Ms. Queen described the effectiveness of the character education program implemented by identifying a structured discipline model applied school wide which is something the school did not have this prior to the character education. She shared,

They [students] desire discipline. It wasn’t that kind of structured discipline before character ed. Now that character education is reinforced and I take it as social skills or life skills, and these are skills that the students need each and every day, not just for today in school or tomorrow, but throughout the rest of their lives.

She also indicated that “conducive for learning, better environment altogether” are among the indicators of the effectiveness of the character education program implemented at the school. While both Ms. Laila and Ms. Slow shared their experiences with the schedule and instructional concerns when discussing the effectiveness of the character education, Ms. Queen shared her experience with the improved overall school environment conducive for learning.

Ms. Queen indicated her belief that character education along with a few other identifying elements has been essential to helping the school separate itself from other schools in the same county. She mentioned that the character education teacher has “challenged them [students] for the entire month to go up to the administrators, shake their hand, greet them, say ‘Hello, how are you?’ and wait for their reply.” Ms. Queen explained how this challenge helped students gain the “habit of coming out of their shell and being able to greet people appropriately,” something Ms. Queen believes sets her school apart from other schools in the county.

Ms. Queen agreed that character education has been affecting school climate, concurring with the experiences of Ms. Laila and Ms. Slow. Ms. Queen understands and equates school climate with the level of healthy peer interactions, as she shared, “Normally, students would lash
out or just retaliate in a negative way. [Instead] They’re talking about whatever differences they have rather than lash out, hit and argue.” Therefore, she believes one of the best ways to measure the impact of character education on school climate is to observe students while handling their grievances. To this end, she added, “They don’t get physical. They’re calm. Voices do escalate, but in their own manner they’re being calm and they’re walking through whatever grievances they have.” Ms. Queen experienced the impact that character education has on students’ behavior for the most part and noticed improvement over the years. In order to support her point, she offered an example that she witnessed, describing it as follows:

“I’ve seen in the hallways, where while two students could be standing facing one each other talking, normally other students will come down and walk in-between the two. What I’ve noticed lately is that rather than walking between the two students that are holding a conversation, the oncoming students will walk around.”

Her belief based on her lived experience indicate that character education is positively associated with the overall school climate.

Ms. Queen shared her own experiences in personally documenting and evaluating the effectiveness of character education as the school does not have a formal way to solicit written feedback from all parties involved, including teachers, students, parents, and support staff. Despite the lack of a formal feedback mechanism, Ms. Queen mentioned that teachers exchange anecdotal feedback reflecting upon their experiences, and she shared, “I get periodic feedback, and the modification that I make if it’s working, then I’m going to implement it into the lesson assignment or the homework assignment.”
Teacher 4: Ms. Sharp

Ms. Sharp, like Ms. Slow, is a career-changer. Prior to joining the IT Academy as a teacher three years ago, she worked as an electrical engineer in private industry for 12 years. Her several duties beyond teaching include STEM coordinator, pull-out teacher, after-school program coordinator, and routine hallway and lunch monitor. Among the things motivating her to teach at IT Academy, Ms. Sharp indicated, “The kids. Flat out. I get joy watching them grow.”

Ms. Sharp described character education in social terms as it relates to the school, saying, “This is just my opinion, is it helps the kids to become aware of their surroundings. It also helps them to become what I consider social.” She shared that the character education at her school “shows them [students] what is right, what is wrong,” and they learn “social media etiquette.” In addition, Ms. Sharp mentioned that character education has taught students “to respect others and teachers,” and provided them necessary skills for better conflict resolution.

According to Ms. Sharp, the character education program in her school has been making a difference in school environment by providing examples like the simple hand-shake assignment given to a student, which led to a meaningful conversation between a teacher and the student. Ms. Sharp shared,

They [students] had an assignment recently where they had to come and shake teachers’ hands to get credit for an assignment. But what it did was they wanted to shake your hand, but it also led to a conversation where the kids stepped outside of themselves and they started to ask, ‘How are you doing today?’ I was like, ‘Oh, interesting.’

For this, Ms. Sharp believes that students are definitely benefitting from their character education.
Regarding her perception of effectiveness of character education in her school, Ms. Sharp spoke positively, confirming, “I think it is effective. I think it works. Character education also gives them [students] a chance to think about how they are going to act in the real world amongst others besides their peers.” Combining her lived experiences related to how her students behave overall in and outside school boundaries, she mentioned, “I've actually run into a few of my students outside of school and they are awesome.”

Ms. Sharp believes that, while character education helps the school identify and separate itself from other schools in the same county, it is not necessarily the only factor contributing to such differentiation. In order to explain her point, she expounded, “To me, the kids are just kids, so I don't know if they are necessarily elevated due to character education versus other students, but at least in my presence, I see a difference.” Ms. Sharp continued, “If you take them from here and you drop them there or vice versa, kids are going to be kids in some respect,” that is, based on her own experiences. Comparing the overall behavior of her students with students in other schools in the county, she shared, “You took them out of this school and you took them on a field trip, you can see how well behaved our kids are. I think that is due to the school.”

Comparing behaviors of IT Academy students with the behaviors of students from other schools in PG County, MD was clearly a common sentiment among teachers.

Ms. Sharp also believes character education has been affecting the overall school climate although she could not quantify the effects. She explained, “Character education is a benefit . . . yeah, definitely. I think it's effective, but I cannot put a degree on it. It affects the school in a positive way.” Ms. Sharp considered the level of interactions between teachers and students as a measure of the effect of character education on school climate; therefore, she shared, “How are the students interacting with us and then how in turn to we interact with each other as teachers?
Oh yeah. It's definitely positive.” She demonstrated a strong belief that character education implementation has impacted positively the attitudes of students towards their peers and teachers.

Regarding documenting and evaluating the impact of character education, Ms. Sharp mentioned a lack of formal method to collect feedback and document outcomes of character education at her school. However, she attested to what the other teachers had said about teachers exchanging feedback in informal ways. Ms. Sharp agreed, “That’s how I get my feedback as to what is going on.” She shared, “We talk about it . . . we incorporate that [feedback] into the classroom.” Ms. Sharp also mentioned that as a result of evaluation of character education, she had to revise and modify some of her teaching practices, offering, “Teachers, we'll talk to each other and say, ‘Hey, this grouping worked really well together and here's why.’ I know I have personally taken that scenario and implemented it in my classroom.” Ms. Sharp’s response indicated there is collegial support and positive feedback exchange among teachers on issues benefitting the social and academic welfare of students.

**Themes Emerged During the Data Analysis**

The primary purpose of this dissertation was, based on teachers’ lived experiences and beliefs, to explore the relationship between character education program and its perceived impact on school climate. The data was collected from the interviews of four teachers who shared their beliefs, their understanding of character education, and their perceptions about the impact, if any, of character education on school climate. The following three themes emerged from the analysis of the teachers' responses: 1) Character education promotes social skills development; 2) Character education helps develop positive personal skills; and 3) Character education contributes to a safe school environment as shown in Table 4.2 below.
Table 4.2: Significant Emerging Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Skills</th>
<th>Personal Development</th>
<th>Safe School Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Social Interaction (Peer &amp; Adult)</td>
<td>• Good Study Habits</td>
<td>• School Climate / Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Good Manner/Citizenship/Conflict</td>
<td>• Self-Esteem / Confidence/Discovery</td>
<td>• Feeling Safe / Awareness of Surroundings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>• Moral / Ethical Values</td>
<td>• Sense of Family / Working in a society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Respect (self/others)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 1: Character education helps develop pro-social behavior**

Analysis of interview data indicated a recurring theme of character education promoting the development of social skills. This theme revealed itself in terms of exploring relationship-oriented virtues, capturing such categories as social interaction, as in the case of peer and adult interaction, good manner/citizenship/conflict resolution, and respect for self and others.

Social skills development resulting from character education emerged as a significant common sentiment among the participants as each participant highlighted the importance of gaining relationship virtues of respect, fairness, civility, and tolerance. Further interrogation data obtained from the participants’ responses revealed these relationship-oriented virtues affect overall feeling, teaching, and learning in their educational environment.
One of the common themes that echoed among the subsets of data was social interaction. The first teacher interviewed, Laila, who entered into the teaching profession five years ago, phrased character education as something promoting “peer and social interaction.” The second teacher interviewed, Ms. Slow, entered into the educational field four years ago. Concurring with Ms. Laila, Ms. Slow shared, “you see a big difference in maturity,” adding, “I believe character education plays an important role in improving relationships between peers and teacher.” When describing character education, Ms. Slow associated the phenomena immediately with “social issues,” and she expounded, “dealing with their, I guess, their peers and how they deal with them here.” According to Ms. Slow, character education has been one of the identifying and separating factors of her school from other schools as “character education actually deals with their [students’] peers.” The third teacher interviewed, Ms. Queen, with over 25 years of experience in the education field, shared similar sentiments. Ms. Sharp, the last teacher who participated in the interview, has only three years of experience in the teaching field. Both Ms. Queen and Ms. Sharp believe character education is a process of “socialization” (Queen), “becoming social” (Sharp), and helping students internalize “social skills,” gain “proper etiquette,” and learn “how to govern themselves accordingly” (Queen). Ms. Queen also believes character education in her school has been making a difference because she “can see an impact between students and their peers.” She shared her observation of “a different type of impact from the student to the adults, the teachers. The way they talk to their peers is one way, the way they associate and talk to a teacher is a different way. The teachers are the leaders.” Furthermore, Ms. Queen expressed that character education has been affecting the school climate because she observed “peer mediation going on among the peers; they [students] are talking about whatever differences they have
rather than lash out.” An analysis of responses discovered that social interaction (peer and adult) skills were a common theme reverberating in each teacher’s response.

The perceived impact of character education on social skills was also evident in students’ mannerisms, perspectives to citizenship, and conflict resolution skills; collectively, these might also be called life skills. Ms. Laila believes character education is important because students “also cover some things that go into citizenship, good manner, and health education.”

A further analysis of data indicated that manner and attitude of students might also be examined throughout the peer-to-peer interaction during less controlled, extra-curricular activities. For example, regarding the county science fair with students from other public schools, Ms. Laila observed, “Overall, they [IT Academy students] are much better behaved than some of the students that I’ve seen in other schools within this county.” She also described her students as “humble but also pleasant and then ready to work.” Ms. Queen’s observation suggested that a good manner theme is particularly significant when analyzing the interactions between students at a time of grievances. She shared, “voices do escalate, but in their own manner they’re being calm and they’re walking through whatever grievances they have.”

Similarly, Ms. Sharp attributed good manners/behavior to the character education program in her school, stating, “I've gone on field trips, you drop them [students] into D.C. at a museum, our kids are so well behaved. I think that is due to the school.”

All participants expressed common sentiment that character education plays a significant role in “developing a can-do attitude, so then they can strive to become anything that they desire to be,” as Ms. Queen attested. Ms. Queen’s observation has been that “Life skills are all about social skills, crisis management, self-esteem, decision-making, resolving conflicts,
communication, and active, positive listening,” and she added, “Character education is really under the umbrella of that,” referring to life skills.

Data analysis revealed another piece of evidence—that perceived positive relationships between character and social skills was through students’ ability to respect themselves and others. Kindness and respect as another significant theme, for both Ms. Slow and Ms. Sharp, was among the identifying indicators manifesting how character education programs have been making a difference in their school. Associating kindness with respect, Ms. Slow responded, “as far as kindness goes and how they treat other people and even respect their elders.” She related the treatment of other people as heavily reliant upon “a simple human act of work and kindness.” She explained, “Then, there are women and men who are working tirelessly to make this a decent environment for them and they respect them or show them kindness.” Agreeing with Ms. Slow, Ms. Sharp also shared, “They learn to respect other teachers, [engage in] conflict resolution. This is just what I have seen from our character education here.” All participants agreed that throughout character education, students develop habits of respecting elders and adults, as well as respecting their own boundaries. Laila, Slow, Queen, and Sharp each described character education in terms of social skills or life skills, skills students need every day, not just for school today or tomorrow, but also throughout the rest of their lives.

**Theme 2: Character education promotes personal development**

The personal development theme, obtained as a result of data interrogation, captures the following sub-themes: Good study habits, Self-esteem/Self-confidence/Self-discovery, and Moral/Ethical values. Analysis of data among the responses of participants revealed these were the primary indicators of character education’s role in developing positive personal skills, helping students develop self-oriented virtues of self-discipline, perseverance, and fortitude.
The first common theme emerging from the analysis of participant response data was good study habits associated with character education. Each participant shared how character education is associated with helping students build good study habits in their school. Ms. Laila shared, “Obviously, students are learning about good study habits and things like that.” She indicated that having good study habits “definitely affects student performance in academic subjects. It has the potential to definitely affect how students perform in my class . . . and in other core subjects.” Agreeing with Ms. Laila, Ms. Slow shared her belief that “character education definitely plays an important role” in improved academic performance. Similarly, Ms. Queen shared that she believes “character education has been beneficial to a lot of the students . . . you should learn something new every day no matter what it is. That’s why the parents send their students here, or their young scholars to gain a habit of read and explore.” She concluded, “I find it [character education] to be beneficial and I see the students excelling.” In this way, Ms. Queen highlighted the importance of character education programs and its perceived impact on students’ academic performance through promoting good study habits. When reflecting on her motivations to continue teaching in this school, Ms. Sharp identified the good study habits of her students as a main reason to remain at IT Academy. She added, “I get joy watching them grow. For instance, in math class, when they get it, that makes me happy. That's the thing that keeps me like, ‘Oh man I can't wait to get to school and try this and try that.’ It's definitely the kids.”

The next common theme that emerged during data analysis was categorized as self-esteem skills. This category encompasses self-confidence, a can-do attitude, fortitude, and self-discovery. Both Ms. Laila and Ms. Queen emphasized self-esteem when they shared their perceptions about character education at IT Academy. Ms. Laila, who besides teaching has also been working as department chair and curriculum coordinator, shared her understanding of
character education as a program that helps students “focus a lot on peer interaction and social interaction, as well as self-esteem issues.” Consistent with Ms. Laila, Ms. Queen added, “Character education is really . . . [about] their self-esteem, self-improvement, and overall proper etiquette, how to govern themselves accordingly, how to speak, when to speak, etc.”

Regarding the behavioral, physical, and emotional challenges associated with adolescence, Ms. Laila commented, “especially self-esteem issues when you’re going into adolescence becomes a big issue and definitely affects student performance in academic subjects.” Ms. Slow, who also wears several hats in addition to teaching, such as science fair chair and Olympiad coordinator, has had the advantage of observing students outside their regular classroom settings. For Ms. Slow, self-esteem and self-confidence becomes more visible when students enter into race-related conversation. About the role of character education in helping students gain confidence to reach beyond their comfort zone, Ms. Slow shared, “I think it has some positives for that. It also made students a little more able to discuss what people that didn’t look like them . . . Yes, definitely. Character education helped them gain confidence to talk about things happening outside the school border.”

Further analysis of data indicated that race discussion was another sub-theme reverberating across the participants’ lived experiences. Ms. Slow expressed happiness to see the level of confidence her students exemplified in handling uncomfortable conversations of race- or ethnicity-related issues. She commented, “Race, like I said, was a big issue but now that they see that, ‘Guess what, we’re here because we care,’ that is less of an issue than it was even two years ago.” Given the fact that African-American population represents almost 80% of the student body at IT Academy, Ms. Slow believes character education provides necessary tools and skills for students to talk openly about their differences without any intimidation or fear. This is the
level of confidence and self-esteem that she believes identifies and separates her students from students in other PG County schools. At this point in the interview, Ms. Slow also noted, “I would say, the way I’ve seen character education affect this set of students is that the majority of the student population is African-American or another minority. A lot of race-related conversations arise in this school.” The teachers were honest in discussing middle school student challenges that exist in today’s society, and, in particular, issues related to adolescence and race. Data suggested teachers perceived a strong correlation between character education and an increase in self-esteem associated with race conversation and daily discourse about people of color.

Furthermore, data analysis showed character education is also positively associated with developing moral and ethical skills, which is the final common theme of this category. Both Ms. Queen and Ms. Sharp found the moral and ethical skills theme significant mainly because students gained these skills over the years due to implementation of character education. Ms. Queen and Ms. Sharp mentioned that character education helps students “to grow physically, mentally, morally, and spiritually down the right path, governing them with skills that they need to survive in society today.” Students who demonstrate maturity in these areas help teachers to focus on teaching and student learning rather than classroom (behavior) management. In order to illustrate the level of moral development and maturity of her students after the implementation of character education, Ms. Queen shared the following observation:

One of the students had gone past another student’s desk and knocked things over—books, papers, etc. He apologized. He didn’t say, “I’m sorry.” He said, “I apologize for accidentally knocking over your stuff.” He proceeded to help pick it up, whereas before character education, that would have never taken place.
Ms. Queen shared another observation to expound on her understanding of character education as it relates to helping students gain habits of acting morally and considerately. She explained,

I see the impact that character education does have on the students for the most part, and I see an improvement. Another thing I’ve seen in the hallways, whereas two students could be standing facing each other talking, normally other students will come down and walk in between the two. What I’ve noticed lately is that rather than walking between the two students that are holding a conversation, the students will walk around.

Ms. Sharp, working as an after school coordinator and lunch monitor in addition to her classroom instruction duties, shared her observation of improved student behaviors progressing every year. She stated, “To watch them grow up, it's actually an amazing thing. They are growing up to be wonderful little human beings. I've seen the shift,” which highlighted the significance of moral, ethical, and behavioral development of students after the implementation of character education. The positive skills indicated in this theme are explored through the lens of the teachers’ attitudes and lived experiences. The teachers observed these behaviors in their students, compared them to previous or other school’s students, and developed conclusions about the students’ overall attitudes, which indicated a positive shift.

**Theme 3: Character education contributes to a safe school environment**

The safe school environment theme captures the tenets of factors influencing the overall feeling in the school. Safe school environment theme covers such sub-themes as positive school climate, feeling safe, and sense of a family. When discussing their perceptions of school climate as it relates to the implementation of character education, all participants agreed that the school climate is a final product of intertwined social, physical, and academic environments of the
school. An analysis of responses of these four teachers revealed their belief that it is important to create a setting where students feel comfortable and motivated to learn and where teachers feel respected and encouraged to do their job (Laila, Slow, Queen, and Sharp).

The first common theme emerging in this category was the changes in school climate and culture as observed by the teachers. Ms. Laila shared that among the things motivating her to teach at IT Academy was the motivation of students and staff to improve school climate. She noted, “The staff and the students here have a real motivation to learn and to keep improving the school, and the climate, and the culture.” Ms. Laila also illustrated how character education impacts the school’s social and academic environment, which collectively impacts the overall feeling of school environment. She shared, “Character education is part of our school’s climate, and our culture about making students not only academically strong, but good, global citizens is actually a part of our mission statement as a school.” Ms. Laila shared her perception on how character education plays a pivotal role in helping to shape the overall school climate because it “has a positive effect on the school climate.” She continued,

I think some of the topics that the students discuss . . . positively impact our school climate because it brings issues that affect students, especially adolescent students, out into the forefront, and students who might feel isolated or the issues that they’re facing as a maturing, young adult, that they’re not just that one student’s problem . . . Character education does help, I think, students not only to understand those things, but gives them some tools to manage some of the behaviors and issues that come with this age group.

Realizing character education is not the only factor helping shape the school’s overall climate, Ms. Laila concluded, “Honestly, I’m really not sure to what degree character education
programs contribute to overall positive climate, but yes, I can say that each year, school climate has been getting better,” after the implementation of character education. Data indicated school climate was also a product of the complex interplay of school mission, culture, and character education.

Ms. Slow and Ms. Sharp both mentioned they believe character education definitely plays a positive role for school climate; however, like Ms. Laila, they were both skeptical about the degree to which character education impacts school climate as compared to other internal and external factors impacting school environment overall. Ms. Slow, after sharing another teacher’s personal story, stated, “We don’t hear any negative talk, which is rare from students. They enjoy it [school climate], and it makes them think about it. I guess it does come into play a little bit. There are some things that are good here [school climate].” She also noted the positive impact of character education was more visible this year than previous years as they had the lowest discipline referral rate during the past 5 years.

Concerning how adult-student interaction has been affecting school climate, Ms. Slow shared that implementing a campus-wide greeting policy demonstrated a change to this effect. She admired, “To have greetings exchanged and then you find out some students are just little kids. They really are. They give you hugs because, like you said, they’re with you longer than most people. They’re like, ‘Hey, this is like seeing a parent.’” Similarly, Ms. Queen expressed her understanding of the impact of character education on school climate in terms of how the phenomenon helps shape the relationships between students. She explained her views, which resonated among other participants as well, in the following example to indicate the perceived impact of character education on school climate:
I see peer mediation going on among the peers. They’re talking about whatever differences they have rather than lash out, hit, and argue. They don’t get physical. They’re calmly, voices do escalate, but in their own manner they’re being calm and they’re walking through whatever grievances they have . . . Normally, students would lash out or just retaliate in a negative way.”

A change in school climate was visible not only in classrooms but also in less-controlled areas such as hallways, according to Ms. Queen. As it was shared above in the discussion of relationship skills theme, the following story captures the salient points. Ms. Queen shared about her perception of how character education has been impacting her school climate, reflecting, “I’ve seen in the hallways, whereas two students could be standing facing each other talking, normally other students will come down and walk in-between the two. What I’ve noticed lately is that rather than walking between the two students that are holding a conversation, the students will walk around.”

The second common theme emerging in this school climate category was feeling safe and having an awareness of surroundings. Ms. Slow shared how the Trayvon Martin incident affected mainly the African-American male population in the school. Despite the traumatic context of the story, Ms. Slow shared how students felt safe and were not intimidated from internal and external environments, but rather experienced freedom to express how they felt about this and similar situations. She shared, “Things that have happened in the past, whether it be news-related, whether it be in the school, character education was an outlet for students to express how they felt about those situations.” According to Ms. Slow, character education provided requisite tools for students to manage their manners, and “It helped students put it in
perspective [as] they’re growing.” Ms. Queen, Ms. Laila, and Ms. Sharp also shared this sentiment.

Adding to this perspective, Ms. Sharp shared her understanding of feeling safe as also related to being aware of surroundings. She commented, “This is just my opinion, is it [character education] helps the kids to become aware of their surroundings. It also helps them to become what I consider social.” As it was shared above, Ms. Laila also believes character education provides a venue for staff and students to discuss social issues and problems associated with adolescence without any intimidation and isolation. Therefore, she believes that “it does start to contribute positively how students interact in our school culture,” as it relates to overall school climate and culture.

The final theme that emerged in the implications of character education on school climate was sense of family. Ms. Laila witnessed a real sense of family in her school and shared, “Even when there are problems and things like that, we work together to get everything going and right the ship. The students, overall, are great. They love learning.” In a slightly different approach, Ms. Queen described safety in terms of students’ ability to resolve grievances among themselves. She explained, “They’re walking through whatever grievances they have. Yes, character education, life skills is impacting the environment of the school.” Agreeing with Ms. Laila and Ms. Queen, both Ms. Sharp and Ms. Slow shared similar perceptions of how character education helped create a safe school environment where students feel motivated and comfortable to learn and where teachers feel respected and encouraged to do their jobs. All participants shared that collaboration among staff and students not only helps students feel safe and lovable, but also motivates them to engage more in the class. As a result, teachers can focus more on the quality of instructional delivery rather than wasting time and energy to manage classroom behavior.
Irregularities Revealed in Data Analysis

Although teachers were consistent in many issues discussed during the interview, data suggests further content analysis of teacher responses, their personal backgrounds, and their stories as teachers at this school, reveal a few significant irregularities. I categorized these irregularities as follows:

a. Different number of years of experience in the profession
b. Difference in their extra duties besides teaching
c. Difference in their understanding of effectiveness of character education

Of the four teachers interviewed, except for one who was over 55 years of age, the three of them were under 35. Additionally, the average number of years in their teaching profession of the younger teachers was four while the older teacher had more than 25 years’ experience as a public school teacher. Furthermore, while the three younger teachers achieved as their maximum credential a Master’s Degree, the older teacher held a doctorate degree in the field. Two of the four teachers interviewed, Ms. Slow and Ms. Sharp, were career changers who moved into the teaching profession after having worked in the corporate world nearly 10 years. Except for Ms. Sharp, all three teachers have previously worked in other schools in the same public schools system prior to joining the IT Academy. The difference in the years of experience in their profession as well as the differences in their age and credentials might have eventually impacted their lived experiences in the school and their understanding of character education and its perceived impact on overall school climate. As evident from the analysis shared above, the interviewers often seemed to have responded to the interview questions by having their experiences three-dimensionalized with current understandings and future expectations of the phenomena.
The data analysis indicated the perceptions of the participants also showed slight variance in their understanding and description of character education and its perceived impact on school climate based on their extra duties besides teaching in the academy. Although Ms. Queen was the most experienced and the one with the highest degree among the interviewers, she did not have any other duties besides teaching. While Ms. Laila was the youngest of all interviewed, she was the only one among others who had some administrative roles such as department chair/curriculum coordinator in addition to her teaching position at the academy.

As a result, their responses seemed to have varied in few noticeable issues. For example, when discussing their understanding of character education, Ms. Laila, the only participant considered part of the school administration team, described character education as it relates to adolescent challenges, noting “when you’re going into [grades every year], adolescence becomes a big issue and definitely affects student performance.” All other participants had a tendency to perceive and describe character education in terms of social skills, peer interaction, and building on ethical/emotional capacity of students, of which Ms. Queen commented, “would fall under the umbrella of life skills.” Slightly different from the others, Ms. Sharp identified social media as part of her understanding of today’s character education, commenting, “The one thing I like about the character education here is it shows them what's right, what's wrong. They learn social media etiquette. I've seen it because they will [students] come and tell me about it.” This highlights the importance of gaining proper social media etiquette in this technological age of communication.

Interestingly enough, Ms. Laila, the youngest, and Ms. Queen, the oldest, were the only two teachers who also associated character education with improved academic performance. While Ms. Queen talked about increasing quality of education, Ms. Laila observed, “Students are
learning about good study habits . . . [which] definitely affects student performance in academic subjects.”

In similar fashion, when discussing the role, if any, character education plays on overall school climate, Ms. Laila described school climate specifically in terms of the challenges associated with adolescence, thereby placing adolescent age at the center of the discussion. She demonstrated a different thought process than the other participants demonstrated, which could be due in part to her school administration role as well as teaching role. While all others described the impact of character education on school climate in terms of improved interactions, relationships, and social behavior, Ms. Laila’s response keyed in on the adolescent aspect of character education. She explained character education “positively impact[s] our school climate because it brings issues that affect students, especially adolescent students, out into the forefront. And students who might feel isolated or the issues that they’re facing as a maturing, young adults, that they’re not just that one student’s problem,” because she thinks these are the challenges that everybody goes through in her school.

The final inconsistency was due to the differences in participants’ understanding of effectiveness of character education in their school and their perceived impact of character education on overall school climate. Although all participants, without exception, shared that character education in general has been impacting overall school climate in a positive way, their understanding of the effectiveness of such impact varied. For example, while Ms. Queen and Ms. Sharp agreed character education was effective for establishing and maintaining a school climate conducive to better education, Ms. Laila and Ms. Slow expressed skepticism about character education as the single driving force behind the ever-improving school climate. Ms. Laila and Ms. Slow attributed at least some of this improvement to other factors, such as being a STEM-
focused and college-prep school. Another commonality that differentiated Ms. Laila and Ms. Slow from the other two participants was that both shared their concerns with the priority of students and the schedule of character education class. Both candidly confessed that they do not believe character education has been effective at the level it should have been. For Ms. Laila, because the mission of the school is STEM-oriented, she believes students have naturally been focusing on math and science education; therefore, they tend to treat character education as a low priority like a third or fourth tier course. With schedule being the common concern hindering the effectiveness of character education, Ms. Slow shared that, because character education class is offered as an extended period in their daily schedule, students seemed to have tired due to an extra-long day. She believes this has been hindering the effectiveness of character education as a major driving force behind the improving school climate.

**Summary of Findings**

The primary purpose of this dissertation was, based on teachers’ lived experiences and beliefs, to explore the relationship between character education programs and its perceived impact on school climate. Four core-subject teachers from a Maryland middle school were interviewed to explore their understanding and lived experiences about character education and its perceived impact on their school climate. The research sub-questions exploring the pedagogical beliefs, experiences, and understandings of teachers about character education and its perceived relationship with the school climate, offered the researcher a workbench with multiple tools that were instrumental in designing the interview questions (see Appendix B).

All participants had a positive experience about character education in their school. They all believed character education is positively associated with improved social skills, more specifically relationship skills as evidenced in classrooms, hallways, and lunchroom. In addition,
most participants reported that character education has been helping students gain self-oriented skills of good study habits, self-esteem, self-discipline, and moral and ethical values, which collectively have contributed to improved academic performance of students.

Furthermore, the majority of participants believe there is a direct relationship between character education and school climate as they have experienced in their school. While most of the participants described school climate in terms of improved peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher relationships, although some participants believed improving academic performance also contributed to the understanding of a better school climate. However, a consensus among participants revealed several other factors affecting the overall school climate. Consequently, some were skeptical about the degree to which character education has been playing a role in improving school climate.

Lastly, participants shared that their school did not have a formal way of documenting a change in school climate after the implementation of a character education program, other than anecdotal reporting during the staff meetings. Nevertheless, some of the participants shared instances where they were motivated to revise and modify their educational and instructional activities after hearing colleagues’ positive stories of implementing character education.

This chapter presented a glimpse into the lived experiences of four teachers who participated in this study. Their understandings and description of phenomenon based on their experiences in their school were explored. This chapter began with offering demographic data of the research site and participants’ background, and it followed with presenting the themes that emerged through data analysis. These three major themes include the following: 1) Character education helps develop pro-social behavior; 2) Character education promotes personal development; and 3) Character education contributes to a safe school environment. The chapter
concluded with exploring the apparent inconsistencies between the understanding and
description of the phenomenon among the study participants. The next chapter will present
interpretations of findings, contribution to practice, and implications for future research.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

Discussions, Implications and Recommendations

The purpose of this interview study was to explore the relationship between a character education program and its perceived impact on school climate. The research included interviews of four teachers in a middle school located in Prince George’s County, Maryland. The results of the interviews capturing the lived experiences of teachers provided a critical lens to analyze the perceived relationships between character education and school climate. Rationale for this research is that we live in a society where school violence, bullying, and tobacco and alcohol use among students in public schools are on the rise. Growing discipline problems and unacceptable behaviors of students in our campuses have been affecting the quality of school climate. There are only a handful of studies examining the relationship between school climate and character education, and the most recent study conducted in this field was almost ten years ago by Benninga, et al. (2006). Therefore, a study was needed to explore the lived experiences of teachers as they relate to relationships between school climate and character education. Among other breeding factors, school climate has been linked with development of pro-social and positive character traits among students (Brannon, 2008).

This chapter presents a summary of the study, interpretation of findings in relation to theoretical framework and literature review, implications for practice, recommendations for future research, limitations, personal reflection, and the conclusion of the study.

Summary of Findings

The primary purpose of this dissertation was, based on the lived experiences and beliefs of teachers, to explore the relationship between character education program and its perceived impact on changing school climate. The sub-questions that guided this study were: 1) What are
the perceptions of school teachers and their experiences with character education as they relate to changing school climate? 2) How do teachers utilize the outcomes of character education? The interview consisted of ten sub-questions to elicit teachers’ perceptions about character education and its perceived impact on school climate. The interview questions were divided into three main parts: first three questions about the interviewee background, the next four questions about their experience with character education, and the last three questions about the perceived impact of character education on school climate. (Interview questions and protocol can be found in Appendix B.) The research questions protocol have allowed the researcher to have a meaningful conversation with the teachers, which was instrumental in exploring the tenets of school climate possibly being impacted as a result of the school’s character education program.

The three main themes that emerged as a result of the analysis of the participants’ responses were as follows: 1) Character education helps develop pro-social behavior, 2) Character education promotes personal development, and 3) Character education contributes to a safe school environment. Further analysis of the findings suggest character education is positively associated with improved social skills, more specifically relationship skills as evidenced in classrooms, hallways, and the lunchroom. Additionally, most participants, based on their experiences, believe character education has been helping students gain self-oriented skills like good study habits, self-esteem, self-discipline, and moral and ethical values, which collectively have helped improve academic performance of students.

Furthermore, most participants shared the belief and common perspective about a change in school climate manifesting itself as a safe school environment. Findings indicate that participants’ understanding of the impact of character education on school climate were informed by positive changes in such internal factors as feeling safe, sense of family, civility, awareness of
surrounding, and friendly and predictable school culture. While most of the participants described school climate in terms of improved peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher relationships, some participants believed that improving academic performance also contributed to the realization of a better school climate.

However, the findings also indicate disparities in opinions about the perceived quality of character education because many of the participants were skeptical in quantifying the impact of character education on school climate. Although all participants had a positive experience about the impact of character education on school climate, the research also revealed a consensus among participants about character education not being the only factor affecting school climate, as there were several other perceived factors playing a role in improved school climate. Therefore, further research may be warranted to examine the degree in which character education among other factors is playing a role in shaping school climate. These findings may provide a vantage point for scholar-practitioners to further focus on designing, implementing, and evaluating character education in an effort to improve overall school climate.

Lastly, findings from this study discovered IT Academy does not have a formal way of documenting a change in school climate after the implementation of character education, other than anecdotal reporting during staff meetings. Nevertheless, some of the participants shared instances where they had to revise and modify their educational and instructional activities after hearing about positive stories their colleagues experienced with the implementation of character education. The researcher believes these findings might provide a vantage point for scholar-practitioners to further focus on designing, implementation and evaluation of character education in an effort to improve overall school climate.
Contribution to Research

This study explored the understandings of teachers about the school-wide character education program in light of their lived experiences in a public middle school located in Prince George’s County, Maryland. The findings from this study inform that character education is perceived to be positively associated with safe school environment as it promotes development of pro-social behaviors and positive personal skills. The literature review offers philosophical and theoretical perspectives in exploring the relationships between teachers’ understanding of character education and perceived change in school climate.

As a theoretical framework, Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory helped shape the analysis of participants’ responses in this study. Social learning theory emphasizes that individuals can learn new information and behaviors by watching other people participate in multiple social-cultural environments. This theoretical framework offered the researcher a kaleidoscopic lens to examine the relationships between visible and hidden trends reverberating among the responses of participants in an effort to populate emerging categories. The researcher was also able to consider how these emerging trends inform practitioners about the perceived relationship between character education and school climate.

The overarching line of inquiry guiding this dissertation was “How do teachers understand and describe character education based on their lived experiences?” The following supporting questions further helped the researcher focus on exploring possible impacts of character education programs and overall school climate: 1) What are the perceptions of teachers and their experiences with character education as they relate to changing school climate? 2) How do teachers utilize the outcomes of character education?

The major themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysis of the teachers’
perceptions are as follows:

1) Character education is perceived to be promoting pro-social behavior.
   a) Character education is perceived to be promoting pro-social skills as manifested in student-peer and student-adult interactions.
   b) Character education is perceived to be associated with good manner, good citizenship, and conflict resolution skills.
   c) Character education is perceived to be inciting respect for self and others.

2) Character education is perceived to be helping positive personal development.
   a) Good study habits are believed to be reinforced by character education.
   b) Self-confidence, self-discovery, and self-esteem are believed to be promoted by character education.
   c) Character education is perceived to be helping students instill and internalize moral and ethical values.

3) Character education is perceived to be contributing to a safe school environment.
   a) Character education is perceived to be positively associated with school climate and culture.
   b) Character education is perceived to be promoting a sense of security and awareness of surrounding by helping to create safe and predictable school environments.
   c) Character education is perceived to be helping students develop a sense of family and sense of responsibility for working in a civil society cherishing democratic values.
Findings in Relation to Literature and Theoretical Framework

This section is to present researcher’s interpretation of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and literature review. The discussion aims to enlighten how the findings confirm, complicate, or contradict aspects of what has been written in existing literature. The researcher utilized social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) as a theoretical framework to ground this study. Social learning theory afforded the researcher to study how people can learn from each other by observing changing behaviors and how these collective efforts help organizations inform its educational practices and overall school climate.

The findings are relevant to different tenets of the relationships between school climate and character education programs. School climate reflects many variables that are informing the relationships between the interconnected circles—student, staff, administrators, and policymakers. A number of these variables of great importance for this study are social, emotional, ethical, behavioral, and academic dimension of a child’s education. The findings of this study highlight the results of similar empirical studies, which is that character education promotes social-emotional competencies and ethical beliefs through “interventions designed to create a safe, caring, participatory, and responsive school” (Cohen, 2006, p. 209). These competencies and beliefs are foundational to a school’s climate. Berkowitz and Bier (2004) looked at school climate as the critical mediating factor of how effective a school’s character education program would be. With support from the National Association of Elementary School Principals, researchers have identified three dimensions of school climate, which are the physical, the social, and the academic dimensions. Therefore, school climate may be defined as a measure of the positive and/or negative feelings about school environment, which is consistent with the findings of this study.
Furthermore, National School Climate Council (NSCC), a Washington, D.C. based advocacy group for school climate reform, argues that “school climate is based on patterns of students’, parents' and school personnel's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” (NSCC, 2015, n.p.). Consistent with the recommendations of NSCC (2015), based on their empirical research in the field, the findings of this study also confirm the same sentiment that “a sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing, and satisfying life in a democratic society” (n.p.). This study suggests that school climate refers to the quality and character of school life.

NSCC (2015) presents the following indicators demonstrate “a positive school climate that can foster youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing, and satisfying life in a democratic society” (n.p.):

- Feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe.
- People are engaged and respected.
- Students, families, and educators develop shared school vision.
- Educators model and nurture attitudes that emphasize satisfaction.

Consistent with the above suggestions by the NSCC, the researcher discovered such categories as “feeling safe,” “awareness of surrounding,” “sense of family,” and “working in a society,” during the iterative coding process. This set of main categories obtained at the end of the recursive coding process shows how well the themes relate to the four major areas of school climate: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the external environment (NSCC, 2015). Based on the various school climate research, the National School Climate Council suggests the following framework to assess the overall health of a school climate.
National Association of Elementary School Principals (www.naesp.org), another school reform advocacy group at the national level, released a similar framework to assess the components of a school climate. NAESP (2016) suggests school climate has three intertwined dimensions, each of which needs to be measured properly in order to determine the health of a school climate. These dimensions are “social dimension,” “academic dimension,” and “physical dimension” (NAESP, 2016). A further comparison/contrast study between NAESP’s and NSCC’s school climate frameworks revealed that NSCC’s framework is more inclusive as it encompasses external factors, such as political, social, and economic, which impact the context, content, and process of teaching and learning.
This study yielded the following major findings, which, except for the “external environment” piece, confirms the other three essential components of NSCC’s (2016) school climate framework. However, these findings do not necessarily mean and cannot imply that character education is the single contributing factor to improved school climate, as several other hidden and explicit factors might affect the health of school climate.

**Character education helps develop pro-social behaviors.** This finding confirms the tenets of “relationships” and “teaching and learning” of NSCC’s framework. For NSCC, the “relationships” dimensions of school climate cover social support, meaningful engagement, school connectedness, inclusiveness, and accepting democratic norms and values. On the other hand, the “teaching and learning” component refers to such aspects of better schooling as social, emotional, and ethical and civic learning, support for academic learning, and support for professional relationships (NSCC, 2015). For the same reason, this study showed that character education not only promotes the development of pro-social skills as manifested in peer-to-peer relationships, but also stimulates good citizenship and good manner. This collectively helps schools create a “positive school climate fostering youth development and learning necessary for a productive, engaging, and satisfying learning and teaching environment” (NSCC, 2015, p. 4).

Consistent with the findings of this research, NSCC’s school framework posits that teaching and learning is fundamentally relational. The patterns of norms, goals, values, and interactions that shape relationships in schools provide an essential area of school climate (NSCC, 2015). School climate is predicated on staff and students’ beliefs that the institution will provide these essential human aspects. Although this study did not explore the beliefs and understanding of students about character education in relation to school climate, the findings obtained after the analysis of teachers reverberate the same underlying sentiment. This sentiment
is that creating a setting where students feel comfortable and motivated to learn and where teachers feel respected and encouraged to do their job is important for meaningful teaching and learning. Humans develop character within the social context of their community (Kohlberg, 1984), where community consists of their family, peers, classroom, school, neighborhood, and beyond.

Berkowitz and Bier (2004) suggest character education is also associated with academic motivation and aspirations (teaching and learning), pro-social behavior, democratic values, character-reasoning maturity, responsibility, respect, self-efficacy, self-control, self-esteem, social skills, and trust in and respect for teachers, all of which are important tenets of school climate and conducive to whole child development. Consistent with the literature (Benninga, 2010; Bigler, 2008; England, 2009), this finding also suggests that when a student feels that his or her teacher cares—not only about academic capital, but also about social capital—the student will gain a higher sense of self-worth and self-esteem. However, the vantage point of this study was the student-teacher relationship. The findings of this study do not propose existence of any associations, positive or negative, between teacher-teacher interactions and school climate after the implementation of character education.

**Character education promotes personal development skills.** This finding highlights the outcomes of other empirical research that character education not only helps student internalize “relationship virtues,” such as respect, fairness, civility, tolerance, moral, and ethical, but also promotes such “self-oriented virtues” as self-esteem, self-discovery, good study habits, fortitude, self-discipline, effort, and perseverance (Benninga, 2010).

The teaching and learning dimension of NSCC’s framework covers such components as social, emotional, ethical, civic learning, support for academic learning, and support for
professional relationships, which are seemingly the same building blocks of the above research finding. In this finding, the researcher argues that, because character education promotes good study habits, stimulates self-discovery, self-esteem, and self-confidence, and instills and internalizes universal moral and ethical values, character education promotes positive personal skills. Consistent with this dimension of school climate, researchers (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004) indicate character education is also associated with academic motivation and aspirations, pro-social behavior, democratic values, character-reasoning maturity, responsibility, respect, self-efficacy, self-control, self-esteem, social skills, and trust in and respect for teachers, all of which are important elements of a school climate conducive to whole child development.

It is evident from this conclusion that the quality of the school climate is associated with improved academic performance, as well as personal development and mental well-being of students. The mental and physical well-being of students is of paramount importance in establishing a school climate conducive to better teaching and learning. Therefore, this finding suggests that a set of positive behaviors may encourage students to attend school, stay focused, work hard, and increase academic knowledge, all while feeling safe and comfortable inside the school. Because the researcher studied the perceived impact of positive personal skills on school climate as manifested via peer-to-peer relationships, this finding cannot confirm or deny any direct relationship between academic performance and character education. This relationship remains to be a matter of another research topic.

**Character education contributes to a safe school environment.** Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs (Cauley, 2009) suggests the base of an institution is safety and security. Confirming Maslow’s theory, NSCC’s “safety” dimension sets the foundational structure for effective schooling. For NSCC, “safety” refers to feeling overall safe—socially, emotionally,
intellectually and physically—is a fundamental human need. Safety of a school is a measure of such hidden and visible curriculum as rules and norms, physical safety, and social-emotional safety (NSCC, 2015). Research indicates that implementing a character education program correlates positively with a safe school environment fostering academic and social skills (Benninga, 2006).

Echoing the NSCC’s “safety” dimension, Character Education Partnership (CEP) (2012) argues, “the goal of a good character education program is to help schools create a safe, caring, and inclusive learning environment for all students where they can develop socially, emotionally, ethically, and academically” (n.p.), which is one of the important facilitators and essential components of quality education. This study’s finding that “character education contributes to a safe school environment” confirms the prevalent understanding of a positive correlation between character education program and perceived school climate (safe and caring environment), as also supported by other research (NSCC, 2015; CEP, 2012; Benninga, 2006). As character education is positively associated with school climate and culture, it also promotes a sense of security and awareness of surroundings by helping to create a safe and predictable school environment. Furthermore, character education helps students develop a sense of family and sense of responsibility for working in a civic society that cherishes democratic values. Therefore, one could postulate that character education contributes to safe school environment.

In summary, feeling safe in school is essential for teachers to teach effectively and for students to learn effectively. According to Dotson and Wiscont (2001), a change in school climate after implementation of a character program may be considered a sign of a school transforming itself from a traditional setting to being driven by character education. However, because research on this topic has demonstrated smaller schools can improve school climate and
modify the school’s physical layout relatively quicker and at different magnitudes than can a larger school (NSCC, 2015), this study cannot offer any insight into the relationship between character education and school climate in larger schools in terms of safety.

Limitations of the Study

This interpretive phenomenological study has suffered four main limitations. They are sample size, semi-structured nature of the interview process, timing of the interview, and diversity of the participants.

This study was limited to four volunteer participants. Although an invitation letter was sent to more than 30 teachers, only four of them agreed to participate in this study. However, given the fact that all four participants were core-subject teachers, the researcher believes that four participants are within reason to conduct this interpretive research study. The researcher also believes that analysis of the responses of these four experienced teachers was helpful in gaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Not only because of the small sample size of the study, but also because of the unique nature of the interpretive qualitative method, should the findings not be generalized to any other demographic or social group. Because the findings obtained in this study are conditional to the experiences of a small group of participants in a certain school environment in a given timeframe, the results are not scalable, not replicable, and not applicable to any other settings. Specifically, the findings should not be generalized to all public middle schools that have been implementing character education in Prince George’s County, Maryland.

The second limitation of this study was the use of a semi-structured interview process, which collects specific data among rich content in a systematic manner. Although semi-structured interview method has attempted to create a non-threatening comfortable environment
with a series of open-ended questions, participants still felt guided to a certain degree, yet encouraged, nevertheless, to openly share their experiences due to lack of random sampling. Although minimally, participants’ biases, experiences, and pre-conceptions about the phenomenon have affected the consistency of the responses. While the researcher made conscious effort not to lead conversation in any certain direction, he did pursue to have the participants provide thematic and descriptive responses.

The third limitation from which the study suffered was the timing of the interview. The interviews were conducted between February and March of 2016, and all staff including teachers were busy with the preparation for the school-wide STEM fair to be held during the second week of March. More than 30 teachers were invited to this study, but because the interview schedule coincided with the busiest time of the school year, only four core subject teachers were able to volunteer. Therefore, it is difficult to argue that experiences of these four teachers about the phenomena studied can be used as a scale to assess the experiences of the other teachers in the same school.

The fourth limitation the researcher has noticed during this study was the diversity of the participants. All of the four participants were female, three of them White and one African-American. This study was not designed to explore the experiences of only female teachers with character education nor was it designed to compare the experiences of White and African-American teachers in this school. Lack of gender, ethnic, religious, and social-economic diversity did hinder the generalizability of the research findings of this study.

**Implication for Practice**

This study, which explored the perceived relationships between school climate and character education, has several implications for practices, also. The findings showed that
implementation of character education programs are perceived to be helping the development of pro-social behavior, self-oriented skills, and safe school environment. Consistent with the assessment of the National School Climate Council (http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/), this study suggests character education is positively associated with the improved school climate in that it promotes relationship virtues, sense of safety, and overall feeling of teaching and learning. The majority of these character education programs focus on not only developing self-oriented virtues but also helping to develop relationship-oriented virtues, which impacts overall feeling and perception of a school as a community of knowledge-builders.

This study also highlighted the need for expanding character education movement to include other public and private school settings. This study was conducted in a public middle school. Anecdotal conversation with teachers revealed this was the only school in the county offering character education as a part of their formal curriculum. Participants highlighted the significance of behavioral, emotional, and physical challenges associated with the adolescent age, and they agreed that addressing some of these challenges early enough in children’s lives might be helpful for later behavioral and emotional development. Therefore, the study suggests that character education programs be implemented starting from elementary grades so students can fully internalize character values before reaching adolescence.

The third implication of the study is related to the fact that implementation of character education programs is still a voluntary reform, which many school leaders are hesitant to undertake. Consistent with the spirit of NCLB Act of 2002, this study suggests character education reform should be a national movement and is adequately mandated and funded by various state and federal agencies. This study agrees that this is the only way if schools are expected to genuinely contribute not only to students’ intellectual capital but also to their
character formation.

Finally, with this age of globalization, the old monotonic fabric of communities has been dramatically transformed into ultra-pluralistic structures in which societies show a trend towards common democratic values (Cauley, 2009). This study suggests that a character education program based on universal values endeavoring to construct a shared civil society without privileging the particular values of any one group is perceived to be beneficial for public schools to establish and maintain a harmony between society and schools.

**Recommendation for Future Research**

This study suggests there is a need for future research to build on current understandings of relationships between character education and the tenets of school climate. Only a few studies exist that specifically examine the perceived relationships between character education and school climate. For many educators, policymakers, and scholar-practitioners, it is still unclear to what extent character education impacts overall school climate. Additional research would provide a deeper and more nuanced insight about experiences that help shape the understanding of interlocking dynamics defining the relationships between character education and school climate.

After conducting this research and reviewing the literature, the researcher recommends the following future research endeavors.

- This research found a consensus among participants about character education not being the only factor affecting school climate as there were several other factors playing a role in improved school climate. Further research may be warranted to examine the degree in which character education among other factors is playing a role in shaping school climate.
• This study was conducted in a middle school with a relatively small student and staff population compared to the county average population. Therefore, a similar study is recommended to be conducted in large public schools with over 1000 enrollments, which are more likely to be prone to bullying and other forms of violence (Lleras, 2008).

• This study explored the relationships between character education and school climate based on the lived experiences of teachers. The literature world would benefit from a similar study based on students’ perception of character education after implementation.

• The focus of this study was the perceived impact of character education on school climate. The research world would benefit from a further study on this topic to assess how a change in school climate after the implementation of character education helps schools change/transform their daily operations into a school driven by character education.

In addition, the following studies are recommended to:

• Explore the perceived impact of character education on the number of disciplinary actions taken against students in urban and economically disadvantaged schools with a history of verbal or physical violence.

• Examine the relationships between character education and school climate in all-boys and all-girls schools, and then conducting a longitudinal study to assess if the gender difference plays any considerable role in internalizing the character virtues.

• Conduct a longitudinal study on behavioral developments of students as they
transition from childhood to adolescence in co-ed settings.

- Explore the understandings of parents about the perceived impact of character education on the development of pro-social behaviors as their children become young adult who should be meaningfully engaging and contributing to the society in which they happen to live in.

Conclusion

**Personal Reflection.** I found this research journey personally rewarding as it gave me an opportunity to triangulate my existing knowledge about the phenomenon with the lived experiences of other colleagues. Interviewing core-subject teachers of different ages and with various levels of experience with character education offered me an opportunity to not only review and revise my existing knowledge about the relationship between character education and school climate, but also gain new insight into how character education has been affecting various tenets of school climate. I had a firsthand opportunity to listen directly from the teachers about the benefits and challenges of character education implementation in their school and to learn about the effectiveness of character education from their lived experiences. The stories and anecdotal evidences documenting the level of their experiences with the phenomenon were instrumental for me to understand and assess the challenges and opportunities as they determined to continue with the character education.

I had hoped to hear more teachers’ experiences and beliefs address to what extent character education as a single factor helps determine the overall health of school’s climate and whether character education has helped schools change its daily activities after noticing a positive change in school climate. With this hope in mind, I aimed to assess if a change in school climate helps a school, as a living organism, change its business practices. Realizing that
changing an organization, as organizations behave like living organisms, with deeper interaction between its external and internal environments, I had hoped to discover a cause-effect relationship between a change in school climate and a change in school organization.

This journey also helped me, as a scholar-practitioner, to gain a deeper understanding of how a theory could be better integrated into real world practices so that the context, content, and the process of scholarly journey becomes more meaningful, engaging, and effective. Throughout this journey, I have come to a solid understanding that a theory without a practice is deaf; a practice without a theoretical lens to ground itself is blind. This was true in particular when I hit the road hard to interpret my research findings in relation to my theoretical framework and literature review earlier in this chapter in an attempt to confirm, complicate, deny or nullify aspects of existing literature.

Post Script Positionality. Although I am now at a higher education spectrum where internal and external dynamics that impact campus climate are relatively different than primary education, I shared the outcomes of this research with general education teachers who often struggle in establishing classroom management strategies. As a scholar-practitioner, I had a chance to grow my understanding of establishing explicit and implicit curriculum (norms and rules of engagement, support, and interactions) that are essential components of classroom management tactics.

Due to timing of the interview, which overlapped with the busiest time of the year in the school, participants were not available to reflect upon the results of this study. While each participant displayed some level of discomfort in describing certain events with concerns of potential misconstrued statements, overall the participants were clear, concise, and authentic about the underlying benefits of character education and its contribution to the healthy school
As a male and long-time educator, I was aware of my biases and pre-conceptions. All four participant teachers in this study were females. In order to prevent peer-pressure, each participant was interviewed individually at a different time and place. I was able to observe that participants also displayed certain attitudes (verbal and physical gesture), noting their understanding of my position. Much of the skepticisms and hesitancy surfaced naturally when teachers compared the behavioral development of boys and girls in their classrooms. I often invited participants to feel free to talk in gender-neutral tone. In addition, I noted there was a consensus across the board in understanding that character education is not a single factor determining the condition of their school climate.

As far as the implications for personal practices are concerned, as a scholar-practitioner, I determined to assume the role of advocacy for improvements to school climate. As an advocate, I will continue to search, learn, and share new applications of related theories and best practices around the world in character education and school climate reforms. This research helped me gain necessary skills, tools, and knowledge to be a better advocate for character education and school climate. As a starting point, for instance, I plan to join the PTO of my daughter’s school and there advocate for a school-wide implementation of character education.

In addition, I will join the character education movement nationwide, promoting the implementation of character education as a school-wide initiative starting as early as elementary grades. I now believe that, in addition to bringing various disciplinary policies and investing on infrastructures, implementation of character education is also an effective tool to deal with increasing campus violence and a wise use of taxpayers’ money. To this end, I plan to visit and, if possible, become a member of the Character Education Partnership (CEP) and National School
Climate Council (NSCC). These two agencies are national advocacy groups, respectively, for the character education movement and school climate.

Furthermore, as an educational consultant, I want to promote the notion of organizational change as a result of changing school climate. Educational institutions, like any organizations, are like living organisms. In order to become successful, schools should positively respond to changing internal and external environments, such as positive change in overall school climate. In order for this positive change to be sustainable and systematic, school leaders must respond to the changing environment by modifying the school’s mission, goals, and objectives so that the school transforms itself into one driven by character education.

Lastly, I understand that knowledge is socially produced and realities are contextually generated. I believe that educational organizations mirror societal values as well as producing them. Schools are considered social systems for many reasons. The roles within the structure of society are established at schools with a commitment to the values of society. Schools exist within the society; therefore, they model society. If we want to create a society of good character values, we must start from the structural elements of educational organizations. We expect schools and societies to reflect each other, not just in terms of subjects taught, but also in terms of school organization and cultural functioning. Educational institutions are complex; therefore, when implementing change in the school climate, this complexity must be taken into consideration. Especially in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society like America, the values and behaviors do not always reflect one group. Therefore, creating unity and communicating the vision of the school carries the utmost importance even before implementing any changes to the organization. It is important for the survival and passing of the ever-changing social system to
the next generations. As Charles Darwin suggests, “It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.”

**Final Thoughts.** School climate reflects many variables that are informing the relationships between the interconnected circles of student, staff, administrators, and policymakers. A number of those variables of great importance for this study are the social, emotional, ethical, and academic dimensions of a child’s education. Character education promotes social-emotional competencies and ethical beliefs through “interventions designed to create a safe, caring, participatory, and responsive school” (Cohen, 2006, p. 209). These competencies and beliefs are foundational to a school’s climate.

The review of the literature highlighted the gap in research about the perceived impact of character education on school climate. The results from this research affirm the outcomes-limited research in the field that character education promotes pro-social, emotional, and ethical behavior by creating safe, caring, loving, participatory, and responsive school climate (Cohen, 2006). Consistent with implications of previous research, this study produced the following three main arguments as its final thoughts:

1.) Character education stimulates pro-social behavior development,

2.) Character education promotes positive personal development, and

3.) Character education contributes to a safe school environment.

Funneling these three points into the theoretical lens, one would propose that character education is positively associated with the improved school climate.

In this perspective, many researchers consider “school climate as the critical mediating factor of how effective a school’s character education would be” (Lori, 2010, p. 10). Therefore, one could easily argue that if character education promotes safe and caring school environment,
and if school climate is a measure of overall positive and/or negative feelings about the school environment, then its logical to postulate there is a positive correlation between character education and school climate.

Character education is not a stand-alone program. Instead, it should be integrated into the fabric of school-wide curriculum. Benninga (2006) confirms implementing character education programs is contributing to the efforts of behavioral change of students while creating safe school and community. If more research demonstrates the same correlation between character education and school climate, then conceivably more schools would accept the challenge of allocating resources to character education programs and paying as much attention to character education as they pay to worrying over standard test scores. In addition to administrators and policy makers, teachers also may benefit by being able to maximize time on teaching and learning rather than on dealing with classroom management. Most importantly, students and parents would benefit as character education helps students build on their social capital while improving their academic performance.

Furthermore, by transforming themselves into settings driven by character education and fostering such universal values as civility, respect, trustworthiness, hard work, and dialogue, schools might encourage community leaders and educational entrepreneurs (public or private) to invest in educational choices that may result in more efficient use of taxpayers money. Finally, schools, as any healthy organization, are required to respond positively to the changes of internal and external environments. According to Benninga (2006), while implementing a character education program positively correlates with a safe school environment that fosters academic and social skills, school leaders should reciprocate this positive change in the school
climate by modifying the school’s mission, goals, and objectives so that schools can transform themselves into educational institutions driven by character education.
References


Appendices

Appendix A: Informed Consent

Appendix-A  Signed Informed Consent Document
Please modify the following information as necessary.

Northeastern University, Department

Name of Investigator(s): Karen Reiss Medwed, Ph.D., Principal Investigator
Hasan Karaburk, Student Researcher

Title of Project: How Character Education Helps Transform Schools

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you are one of the core subject teachers at this school.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between character education program and its perceived impact on school climate as it relates to helping school change its daily practices.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in a personal interview with the researcher. The interview will have about 10 open-ended questions, and it’s expected to take around 25–30 minutes. The interview questions are designed to explore your perception about the impact of character education program at your school on overall school climate.

**Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?**

You will be interviewed at a time and place that is convenient for you, but not during official school hours. The interview will take about 30 minutes. Three weeks later, we might follow up with you via e-mail should we need any further clarifications when reviewing your responses.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

The study does not involve any physical or psychological risks. The study will not cause any personal discomfort, stress or personal risks to participants.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, we hope that the information obtained from this research may help expand your understanding of the relationship between character education and school climate.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project. Your responses to this study will be kept completely anonymous. Immediately after the interview, the researcher will assign a pseudonym (code name) to protect your identity. These code names identifying the individuals will
immediately be stored away to prevent any accidental third party access. Only the researcher and the principal investigator will have access to this code name table. The code names will be used during and after the transcription of interview records. The researcher himself will transcribe the interviews. As an added layer of security, each transcription will individually be kept separate from the code name table. Code names will always be used before, during and after the analysis and interpretation of data.

All original materials will be kept in password-protected cloud applications, and other than principal investigator and the researcher, no other party will have access to these files. However, because the researcher needs to access transcriptions more frequently during the data analysis, the transcriptions will be kept at both local computers and e-mail environments. All original recordings and signed informed consent forms will be retained for 3 years in password-protected cloud applications and will be destroyed afterwards all together.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your participation is entirely voluntary. No harm will come to you if you decide not to participate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because the study does not involve any physical or psychological risks, no research-related injury is possible.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee at this school.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Hasan Karaburk, via e-mail at karaburk.h@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. Or, you can also contact Karen Reiss Medwed, PhD via e-mail at k.reissmedwed@neu.edu, the Principal Investigator.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

You will not be provided any monetary incentive to take part in the research.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

There will be no cost that may be incurred by the participant for the study.

**Is there anything else I need to know?**
There is nothing else you as a participant need to know as every detail has been explained in this document.

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________
Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

____________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the Date
participant above and obtained consent

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix B: Interview Protocols and Interview Questions

APPENDIX –B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL & QUESTIONS

Interviewee (Name & Title): ________________________________________________

Institution of Interviewee: ________________________________________________

Interviewer: ___________________________________________ Date: ___________

Part I: Interview Protocol

You are invited to speak with me today because you have been identified as a lead/core subject teacher in this school. Today’s topic is character education, and more specifically we will talk about the relationships between character education and school climate. Therefore, the purpose of this interview is to explore the relationship between character education program and its perceived impact on school climate as it relates to helping school change its daily functions. Your experience as one of the lead teacher is critical in helping us broaden our understanding the perceived impact, if any, between character education and school climate.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture eaching you say, I would like to record conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [Thank You!] I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the recordings which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me [Informed Consent Form]. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

I have planned this interview to last no longer than about 30 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Part II: Interview Questions

A. Interviewee Background (3-5 minutes)

1) What is your story as a teacher and how long have you been teaching in this school?
2) Tell me about your other duties in the school besides teaching.

3) Describe what motivates you to continue teaching here.

**B. Experiences with Character Education** (5-10 minutes)

4) Based on your experience here, what is your understanding of character education?

5) Do you believe that the character education program has been making a difference in this school? If so, please describe how.

6) Based on your experience in this school, how do you describe the effectiveness of character education program in your school?

7) How important, you believe, is character education when identifying and separating your school from other traditional school?

**C. Character Education with School Climate** (5-10 minutes)

8) Do you believe that the character education program has been affecting the school climate? If so, please describe how by giving an example.

9) Based on your personal experience here, how do you document and evaluate the impact of character education on school climate?

10) Do you remember any instances when a change in school climate after the implementation of character education has helped you to revise and modify some of your daily educational practices? If so, explain, how by giving examples.

============== End of the Interview Questionnaires ===============

Thank you for sharing your experiences with the character education program in your school. Your time and honest responses are highly appreciated.