International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal

Volume 16 | Issue 2 Article 4

November 2021

The Propensity of Character Education to Promote and Predict Moral Development as Measured in Middle School Students

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Abstract

With an interest in whether character education programs promoted moral development, a study was conducted on a group of middle school students. The question driving this quantitative research asked whether four components of character education—namely self-management, self-efficacy, social awareness, and growth mindset—might predict moral reasoning in adolescents. Data from a multiple and simple regression provided an answer to this study's question. Surveys completed by 126 students (grades six through eight) provided data for the initial multiple regression. Upon conducting the multiple regression, growth mindset emerged as the only component with a statistically significant ($p < .001$) relationship with moral reasoning. After the non-relational variables were removed, and a simple regression was conducted, the analysis indicated growth mindset accounted for 11% of a student's moral reasoning and yielded a small effect size of .11. Along with identifying a significant relationship between growth mindset and moral reasoning, the study further identified an underlying relationship between context, growth mindset, and moral development. In light of Christian educators' "Scriptural advantage", Christian schools hold a "contextual advantage" when it comes to establishing cognitive, instructional, and societal contexts.

Keywords

character, morality, character education, moral development, growth mindset, cognitive context, instructional context, societal context, worldview

ICCTE Journal
Supporting Christian Scholarship And Service

The Propensity of Character Education to Promote and Predict Moral Development as Measured in Middle School Students

Kristine Smith, Union University

The Rationale for the Research

For the past five decades, I have sat, studied, and served in both the parochial and the public school settings. As a student, I have experienced school days that began with pledges and prayers, as well as those that began with announcements and acknowledgements. As a Christian teacher and administrator, I have formatted lessons that were Biblically-grounded as well as those that were secularly founded. Over the years, as God maneuvered me in and out of these two distinct educational settings, I began to develop an awareness of the increasing presence of character education programs within public schools. More specifically, I noticed public schools were turning to character programs in order to meet the "spiritual" needs of their students. But, I wondered, was this even possible? Could the gaps left by the removal of Biblical principles be filled through the addition of behavioral practices? Was it possible to promote a student's moral development through the components of character education? This was a topic I found worthy of exploration, as the ensuing answer could affect Christian educators in both the public and the parochial setting.

Pre-Research Preparations

The first preparation step involved clarifying the research question which would anchor the study. After examining the available resources (e.g., access to middle school students) and identifying the key components in character programs (e.g., self-management, self-efficacy, growth mindset, and social awareness) the following research question was posed: To what extent might components of character education—namely self-management, self-efficacy, social awareness, and growth mindset—predict moral reasoning in middle school students?

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The second preparatory step involved research through reading. Since character education and moral development served as the center of the study, a distinction would be needed between the terms "character" and "morality." Additionally, in order to comprehend the present-day rise of character programs, an exploration would be needed of the evolving shift from moral instruction to character education.

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Distinction between Character and Morals: Is Morality Synonymous with Character?

The first, and most general, distinction between character and morality is found in their individual composition. When asked to describe a person's character, several traits may be identified, such as honesty, integrity, loyalty, and determination. While the number of traits—as well as the types of traits—may vary between individuals, each person's character is composed of the qualities he possesses (Berkowitz et al., 2008; Berkowitz et al., 2017). One person of character may be described as honest and hard-working, while another person of character may be defined as trustworthy and tenacious. When identifying a person's morality, however, a list of traits is not given; instead, there is only a recognition of the presence or absence of morals—a person is either moral, or he is immoral (Barnes & Kenny, 2014). Character, then, may be described as a collection of traits, as an assemblage of parts, while morality may be described as a complete entity, as an amalgamation of all parts.

Secondly, because character is representative of parts, and morality is indicative of a whole, a deeper understanding—and qualifying factor—becomes evident when differentiating between these two terms. Namely, one may have parts without the whole, but never the whole without the parts. As such, a person with character (the parts) "might" be someone with morals (the whole), but a person with morals (the whole) "must" be someone with character (the parts). Additionally, since morality may be defined as the amalgamation of traits, whereas character is an assembly of traits, a hierarchical framework emerges wherein the attainment of morals surpasses the attainment of character (Kohlberg, 1980).

A third distinction between the terms character and morals may be found in their mode of acquisition. Character develops through knowing, feeling, and doing (Baehr, 2016; Berkowitz et al., 2008; Dewey, 1909; Lickona, 1991), or, to use Aristotle's terminology, through just thoughts, temperate emotions, and courageous acts (Barnes & Kenny, 2014). In other words, when it comes to character development, practice may make present. Therefore, character traits may be classified as teachable. Morals, however, whose emergence must await the assimilation of character traits, are far less instructional. Though they may be identified through examples (past and present) as admirable, and depicted through discourse as valuable, morals are far more progressive than they are prescriptive. Based upon these distinctions, when referenced in this study, the term *character* will denote any of a variety of externally teachable traits, while the term *morality* will denote all of the internally assimilated "character" traits.

Moorings of Moral Instruction

From an American perspective, education and morals have been coupled. In his book, *Kingdom Education*, Glen Schultz (2002) drew a connection between education and the preservation of society. Referring to the original role of education in America, not to mention its role since the creation of man as recorded in the book of Genesis, Schultz pointed to the purpose of education recorded in the Massachusetts School Act of 1647. According to this document, all children were to have an education to the degree that each child would be able to read Scripture. At this time, the primary purpose of an education was to equip one to read the Bible for personal benefits as well as for societal benefits. In what was yet to become an independent nation, the early colonists recognized the need for a society that was cohesive in its values and in the source of those values. Less than 30 years later, in 1671, this same sentiment was recorded in the *General Laws and Liberties of New Plymouth Colony* as, once again, the colonists stated children must be educated "at least to be able to read Scripture" (Schultz, 2002, p. 107).

Almost three centuries after the Massachusetts School Act of 1647, in 1954, the role of education had greatly changed (Schultz, 2002). No longer was knowledge of the Scriptures the primary role of education. In the time that had passed, education's focus shifted from teaching Biblical values to teaching societal values – which were now distancing themselves from Biblical truths. In 1962, prayer was removed from public schools; in 1963, Bible reading was taken out of public schools; and, in 1981, the Ten Commandments

could no longer be displayed in public schools. Consequently, a philosophical dualism developed as schools sought to separate beliefs from behaviors—theology from ideology (Schultz, 2002).

In his book, *American Gospel*, Jon Meacham (2006) addressed the struggle between religious practices and democratic policies. What he termed the "sensible center" was the point at which religion and democracy coincided. From the very beginning, the American nation strove to build a society in which citizens' freedoms and beliefs stood side by side. It was in moving away from this sensible center and toward the practice of extremism that our nation began to become imbalanced (Meacham, 2006). As society's mindset began to shift, the impact affected the educational mindset as well. When morality became synonymous with religion and when religion was deemed incompatible with government, extremism emerged, and the outcome resulted in the separation of church and state (Meacham, 2006). As a result, moral instruction was removed from the schoolhouse (Schultz, 2002).

When the separation between church and state widened, so too did the separation of thoughts between philosophers. Along with a decreased focus on Scriptural theology came an increased focus on societal philosophy. Though not aimed directly at the schoolhouse, Darwinism, the "doctrine of specificity," and "logical positivism" all had an impact on education (Lickona, 1991). Darwinism's theory of evolution led to the notion that morals, like mammals, would evolve; studies by behaviorists Hartshorne and May led to the "doctrine of specificity," an assumption that morals were inconsistently held and, therefore, could not be taught; and, with an ever-growing preference for scientific facts (which could be tested) over personal beliefs (which could not be tested), "logical-positivism" emerged and moral instruction withdrew (Lickona, 1991).

As the nineteenth century unfolded, so, too, did the distinction between morality and character—between preferable and infallible. By 1895, "moral ideals [were separated] from religious doctrines," and the inerrant Word of God was relegated to a piece of "great literature" (Arthur, 2019, p. 65). In a society where secular now implied the absence of theology as well as of religion, the conditions prompted a shift from biblically derived morality to humanly defined character (Arthur, 2019; Sakamoto, 2008). Therefore, the twentieth century ushered in an era in which God—though not rejected—was rerouted as even Christians proposed, "God [belonged] to the private sphere" (Arthur, 2019, p. 67). Failing to learn from the past, America attempted to separate their beliefs from their behaviors, mistakenly thinking it was possible to fear the LORD yet "appoint their own priests" (2 Kings 17:32; *New American Standard Bible*). As a result of building upon the shifting sands of accommodation, by 1906, America had replaced principles with pragmatism, Church reverence with State preference, and moral development with character education (Arthur, 2019).

Call for Character Education

At a national level, the call for character education sounded at the beginning of the twenty-first century with No Child Left Behind (NCLB). At a personal level, the concern with character education sounded a couple years earlier. As a public-school teacher, it seemed futile to teach character traits such as compassion, honesty, and responsibility apart from their biblical context. As information for this study was gathered regarding the call for character education, rationales for increasing student achievement, promoting social-emotional learning, and improving school climate emerged as primary motivators. Though student conduct was included—insofar as behavior affects learning, relationships, and environment—purposeful beliefs (detached from biblical truths) were absent from character instruction.

Improvement of Student Achievement

Improving student achievement is one factor that has driven school leaders to implement character education programs (Benninga et al., 2003). In the aftermath of the 2001 NCLB mandate, and with the 2009 Race to the Top directives, the focus on improving academic achievement for students in the United States has escalated. Additionally, whenever components of learning are scrutinized,

educators reexamine those elements associated with student achievement.

In *Double Jeopardy*, Hernandez (2011) examined why more efforts are needed to improve student achievement. From his ten-year study involving 3,975 students, Hernandez identified reading (and poverty, thus the double jeopardy) as a primary indicator of success in high school. Supporting the findings of Hernandez, McFarland et al. (2019) reported on student achievement in *The Condition of Education 2019*. After analyzing data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Congress received an educational report, as did the American populace. To give an overview of student achievement, data collected from students in grades four, eight, and twelve were compiled and presented. According to the report, 63% of fourth graders scored basic or below basic in reading skills (McFarland et al., 2019). Following the release of this report, the need for programs impacting student achievement—such as character education programs—became evident (Hernandez, 2011; McFarland et al., 2019).

Improvement of Social-Emotional Learning

Since social-emotional learning (SEL) has been connected with student achievement (Bavarian et al., 2013), studies have been conducted to determine if there is a correlation between character education and SEL (Brackett, 2018; Mahoney et al., 2019; McKown et al., 2015). While some schools use the term character education to describe the program or procedures employed to promote and develop positive student behavior, many schools use the term SEL to define their approach to behavioral intervention. Since SEL is a term that encompasses students' social (interpersonal) and emotional (intrapersonal) needs, it is sometimes considered an umbrella term which includes character education (Jones et al., 2017).

The interchangeable use—and meaning—of the terms character education and SEL is evident within the research reported by Taylor et al. (2017). While self-awareness (respect), self-management (self-control), social awareness (empathy), relationship skills (integrity), and responsible decision making (responsibility) were referred to as elements of SEL by Taylor et al., (2017), these same terms were also identified by Jones et al. (2017) as components of character education programs. In addition, the presence of interpersonal skills—such as conflict resolution, empathy, and problem solving—were also found to be common among the SEL and character programs (Mahoney et al., 2019). Presently, programs that promote SEL or character education are costly. Some of the schools that have the greatest need for SEL also have the greatest need for financial aid (Baehr, 2016; Jones et al., 2017; Mahoney et al., 2019).

Improvement of School Climate

Along with impacting student achievement, character education programs have also been implemented to improve school climate. Since correlations have been noted between student achievement and school climate (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015; Stalker et al., 2018), attention has been directed toward identifying and improving school climate with the goal of improving student achievement as well as creating an environment for SEL. According to Quinn (2017), students want a school climate which exudes service and a school curriculum which promotes purposeful living. Since adolescents believe their life has a purpose and this purpose is meant to connect them with their community, the more opportunities students receive to serve within their community, the more purposeful they feel.

Components of Character Education

While character education programs have individual characteristics, varying programs shared specific components. Though the terminology may differ, character education programs tend to address all, or some, of the following components: student ownership or responsibility, student motivation, student interactions with peers, and student self-esteem. The MESH Survey (Mindset, Essential Skills, Habits), developed by Transforming Education (2016), is an instrument designed to measure the effectiveness of character education programs. The areas of personal competence measured through the MESH Competency Survey are self-management, self-efficacy, growth mindset, and

social awareness. Since these four components are prevalent within most character programs, they served as the measureable elements of character education for this body of research.

Self-management

While self-management practices are common to character education programs, the overall goal for self-management skills may differ between, or even within, character programs. Depending upon what a student is being taught to manage, or regulate, self-management may follow one of two directives: management of *behaviors* that prepare one to learn, or management of *thoughts* that propel one to learn. As a result, self-management could focus on external behaviors (such as learning how to set goals) or on intrinsic practices (such as learning how to redirect one's thinking).

Self-efficacy

Lau et al. (2018) defined self-efficacy as an individual's belief that they are responsible for their own learning. According to Lau et al., self-regulation (of thoughts, attitudes, and actions) increased self-efficacy, while Jiang et al., (2018) identified motivation as a contributor to self-efficacy. From their research, Jiang et al. concluded students attribute higher value to tasks they feel prepared to complete; as student self-efficacy increases, so too does their perceived value of the task. This relationship aligns with Dewey's (1938) view of experience being necessary for instilling value, as well as with Lickona's (1991) view of value being perceived through purpose.

Growth Mindset

Growth mindset may be defined as the growth of how one's mind is set; the belief that one's perseverance increases one's possibilities. The counterpart to a growth mindset is a fixed mindset; the belief that one's potential is stationary rather than stretchable (Rhew et al., 2018). Interested in whether a student's propensity for motivation and self-efficacy could be increased, Rhew et al., (2018) conducted research to test the potential for expanding a student's growth mindset. The results identified a significant relationship between motivation and growth mindset, which led Rhew et al. to conclude that growth mindsets could be expanded.

In the overview of programs delineated by Jones et al. (2017), the component of mindset was identified separately from the component of character. This is significant, because assessments for character development often include growth mindset as a component of character, rather than as partner to character (Transforming Education, 2016). Of the 25 programs examined by Jones et al. (2017), four addressed mindset in at least 20% of their materials, while another four focused on mindset in approximately 40% of their material. And, just as the descriptors for character differed among programs, so, too, did the descriptors for mindset. Identified within this category were the expected attributes of determination, perseverance, and gratitude, as well as the less anticipated practices of relaxation, positive chanting, and negative thought exchanges (Jones et al., 2017).

According to Carol Dweck (2017), beliefs and values have a directional effect on growth mindset; growth mindsets arise from one's beliefs (about self) and reach toward one's values (in life). More than any other trait or behavior, a growth mindset may, "profoundly affect the way you lead your life" (Dweck, 2017, p. 14). Therefore, because growth mindsets are so influential in a child's life—and because they are formed by beliefs and values—connecting beliefs and values to Scriptural truths is essential for optimal mindset development. From this perspective, the teacher in a Christian-school setting holds a significant advantage over her colleague in a public-school setting. Enabled (and expected) to share with students that they, "are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand," (Ephesians 2:10; *New American Standard Bible*) teachers in Christian schools are able to promote a growth mindset through the truths of Scripture. By anchoring beliefs and values to biblical precepts, a stronger foundation may be poured from which students may develop more expansive and invasive growth mindsets.

Social Awareness

Batanova and Loukas (2016) identified social awareness as an individual's awareness of the thoughts, feelings, and rights of those within their family and community. Within the school setting, social awareness indicates a student's ability to be aware of the thoughts and feelings of their peers—of those within his educational society. Surveys, such as the MESH Competency Survey (Transforming Education, 2016), identify social awareness as one of the main contributors to school climate. Questions on the survey ask students how often they listen to someone else's point of view, how well they get along with people they consider "different," and how readily they avoid entering arguments (Transforming Education, 2016).

Examples of Character Education Programs

Within the rural county where this study was conducted, various forms of character education may be found within the county's four elementary schools (K – 5) and one middle school (6 – 8). Three schools have informally created their own approach to character education by implementing components specific to their needs, while two schools (one elementary and the middle school) have purchased a character education program. Of the three customized versions of character education, one school adapted components from Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a second school selected elements of a trauma-informed school, and the third adopted elements from Positive Action (PA). The fourth elementary school and the middle school purchased Leader in Me (LiM), a program that has been implemented with varying degrees of fidelity over the past eight years.

Elements of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), is an approach to promoting, modeling, and reinforcing positive attitudes and actions among school-age children. PBIS does not come with an established curriculum, nor does it embody a regulated set of procedures. Rather, PBIS is a customizable approach to molding student behavior by managing school climate (Horner & Macaya, 2018). PBIS is a system whose effectiveness depends upon its clearly identified expectations, consistently implemented practices, and collectively endorsed protocol. Each school determines the areas of focus and systematically provides instruction as to what it "looks like" when each of the areas is practiced; the behavior is explained, modeled, practiced, and rewarded. Because PBIS relies on rewarding positive behavior, it also relies on documenting the installment of positive rewards (Horner & Macaya, 2018).

Elements of Trauma-Informed Schools

Trauma-informed schools are known more for their proactive approaches to deterring and deescalating student misbehavior than for promoting and promulgating students' virtues and values. However, since the trauma-informed approach combines teacher awareness (and, therefore, understanding) with student responsibility, it shares common goals with many character education programs. In light of the reality of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and with an increased awareness of their effect upon learning (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016), trauma-informed practices are beginning to support—and may supplant—character education programs in schools. As statistics on students who have been or are exposed to traumatic events continue to propagate, the need for intervention is apparent.

Elements of Positive Action

Positive Action (PA) is a program whose purpose is two-fold: to increase positive behavior among students and to improve school climate as a result of students' positive behavior. As a program, PA has been recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and endorsed by the Collaboration for Academic, Social, and Emotion Learning, otherwise known as CASEL (Stalker et al., 2018). While the implementation of PA may look different from school to school, the program itself is scripted. Lessons, 140 per grade level, have been developed for students ranging from kindergarten to twelfth grade and focus on the topics of self-awareness, self-management,

personal responsibility, social awareness, and relational skills (Stalker et al., 2018).

Leader in Me

The LiM program creates a framework for interpersonal and intrapersonal skills through the promotion and practice of seven habits identified by Stephen Covey (1989) in his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Stephen Covey's Seven Habits include:

- Habit #1 – Be Proactive (take responsibility for your actions and attitudes)
- Habit #2 – Begin With the End in Mind (set long-term goals; think ahead)
- Habit #3 – Put First Things First (plan and prioritize to meet goals)
- Habit #4 – Think Win-Win (compromise; problem-solve)
- Habit #5 – Seek First to Understand – Then to be Understood (embrace empathy)
- Habit #6 – Synergize (work collaboratively; develop teamwork)
- Habit #7 – Sharpen the Saw (refuel self; focus on the spirit as well as the mind)

Since LiM habits embody the same competencies identified in SEL (self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, social awareness, and self-awareness), the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has endorsed the program. To date, LiM is located in 4,043 schools representing 23 countries around the world ("How *Leader in Me* Started," 2018).

Findings from Research and Readings

Upon reviewing this nation's past educational practices, a noticeable shift becomes evident in America's educational approach to moral instruction. Gone are the days when all schools, public as well as parochial, were expected to foster students' moral development. Presently, the application of character programs has replaced the implementation of moral instruction. However, even though the mindsets and materials have changed, the desired outcome remains the same: Schools are expected to instill values in students for the good of self as well as for the good of society (NCLB, 2002; Sojourner, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2009; Watz, 2011). Though biblical teachings have been removed from public education, programs expounding positive character traits and essential relational skills have taken their place (Pascale et al., 2017; Reno et al., 2017; Romanowski, 2005).

Gone are the days when all schools, public as well as parochial, were expected to foster students' moral development. Presently, the application of character programs has replaced the implementation of moral instruction. However, even though the mindsets and materials have changed, the desired outcome remains the same: Schools are expected to instill values in students for the good of self as well as for the good of society.

As a result of the instructional exchange of moral truths for character traits, two questions arise: *Will the substitution of character education for moral instruction yield the same results?*, and, *Will character traits, once removed from their biblical soil, still be viable?* The answer to these questions is as important to administrators (and parents) within the parochial school system as it is to those within the public school system. If the placement of children in an environment where character traits are separated from beliefs (public school) offers the same moral outcome as the placement of children in an environment where character traits are anchored to beliefs (Christian school), then Christian schools may lose their "moral advantage." The supposition that free public education may be as morally effective in promoting moral development as tuition-based Christian education may serve as a tipping-weight on the scale of school choice.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine whether components of character education are predictive of moral development. Since one of the desired outcomes of character education is the improvement of student attitudes—as evidenced through choices and behaviors—its implementation may carry with it the expectation of increasing student morality. Similarly, as a proponent of social-emotional learning, character education may be viewed as a vehicle for addressing students' spiritual needs (Baehr, 2016; Lickona, 1991).

For this research, the following four components of character education were examined: self-management, self-efficacy, social awareness, and growth mindset. These components were chosen because of their prevalence within character education programs. By analyzing the effect each component had upon moral development, this study explored whether specific areas of character education led to higher levels of moral development.

As schools and society continue to realize the need for—and value in—educating a child's spirit, character education programs may be viewed as a practical solution. However, all programs may not yield the same results; therefore, understanding the effect self-efficacy, self-management, social awareness, and growth mindset have upon a student's moral development may prove instrumental in the selection of an appropriate character education program.

Design of the Study

The design of this quantitative study was nonexperimental in that this researcher had no control over the independent variables of self-management, self-efficacy, growth mindset, or social awareness. Research data was collected from two individual surveys integrated within Qualtrics. The collective survey, titled MESH + SRM-SF, combined the MESH (Mindset, Essential Skills, and Habits) Competency Survey with the Sociomoral Reflection Measure-Short Form Survey (SRM-SF) (Gibbs et al., 1992; Transforming Education, 2016). Data from the MESH survey provided student scores for self-management, self-efficacy, growth mindset, and social awareness, while data from the SRM-SF provided student scores for moral reasoning. The MESH + SRM-SF survey was administered to sixth through eighth grade students in the fall of 2020.

Participation in the research was voluntary; no groups were formed as a matter of convenience or through the process of randomization. All of the 525 students attending the middle school were invited to participate in the study. Those interested in completing the survey were given a parental consent form, as well as a student assent form. These forms explained the purpose of the study and provided a general description of the online survey.

Student Sample

The participants in this study were sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students attending a public middle school located in rural, southwest Tennessee. When the survey was conducted, the participants were between the ages of 11 and 14. The sample group was comprised of 136 middle school students who volunteered to take part in the survey. Of these, nine participants did not complete the entirety of the survey, resulting in the deletion of their partial surveys and a reduction of the sample size. From the completed surveys, data was collected from 127 students.

Survey Tool and Sample Descriptives

The MESH + SRM-SF survey was created by combining the MESH (Mindset, Essential Skills, and Habits) Competency Survey with the Sociomoral Reflection Measure-Short Form Survey (SRM-SF). In addition to their verified reliability and validity, the MESH survey was selected for its measurement of self-management, self-efficacy, social awareness, and growth mindset, while the SRM-SF was selected for its measurement of moral reasoning (Gibbs et al., 1992; Transforming Education, 2016). The newly combined survey tool contained a total of 50 questions: 25 questions related to self-management, self-efficacy, social awareness, and growth mindset skills; 22 questions related to moral reasoning skills; and three descriptive questions identified gender and previous school enrollment. The 25 survey questions relating to

social-emotional competencies (MESH) were answered according to a 5-point Likert scale.

Scoring for the MESH portion of the survey was calculated by multiplying the number of questions attributed to each component with the possible score for each question. Since the survey utilized the 5-point Likert scale, each question was worth a maximum of five points. To determine the collective score for MESH, the component scores were totaled, yielding an overall MESH score of 125. Table 1 indicates the minimum and maximum scores associated with the MESH Competency Survey.

Table 1

Minimum, Maximum, and Mean Scores for MESH

	Min	Max	Mean	*SD*	*N*
Self-management	9	45	36.83	4.07	127
Self-efficacy	4	20	13.81	2.44	127
Growth mindset	4	20	14.62	3.30	127
Social awareness	8	40	28.72	3.95	127
MESH	25	125	98.35	11.46	127

Note. MESH scores are based upon a 5-point Likert scale.

The 22 questions comprising the SRM-SF portion of the survey related to moral reasoning. From the 22 questions, 11 addressed the importance of telling the truth, helping others, and obeying the law. Following each survey question, participants explained why—or "justified"—their choice with a written explanation. As a result of their explanation—and, more specifically, of their word choice—a level of moral reasoning was assigned. Word choices such as "told to," "always," and "bad" indicated Level One thinking. Level Two thinking was inferred through words like "next time," "need it," and "reward". By Level Three, indicative words/phrases included "real friend," "should/ought to," and "feels good/guilty." Finally, by Level Four, words suggestive of higher moral reasoning include "sacred," "conscience," and "duty."

Since Gibbs et al. (1992) identified four stages of moral maturity, the individual scores ranged from one to four. The first two stages, Level 1 and Level 2, represented the Immature Level; the last two stages, Level 3 and Level 4, represented the Mature Level. Because Gibbs et al. (1992), like Kohlberg, identified movement from stage to stage as incremental rather than instant, scores such as 1.5, 2.5, and 3.5 were used to identify these "transitional stages" (p. 28). Table 2 presents data from the SRM-SF survey regarding the sample's minimum, maximum, and mean scores for moral reasoning.

The Results from Regressions

To determine whether there was a relationship between the predictor variables (self-management, self-efficacy, growth mindset, social awareness) and the criterion variable (moral reasoning), data were analyzed using a multiple regression. The results showed the linear combination of predictor variables accounted for 11% of one's moral reasoning, $R^2 = .11$, adjusted $R^2 = .090$, $F(4,122) = 4.13$, $p = .004$. According to Cohen's (1988) guidelines, the effect size of .11,

Table 2

Minimum, Maximum, and Mean Scores for Moral Reasoning

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	*SD*	*N*
Moral reasoning	1	4	2.13	.37	127

though small, falls just under the .13 criterion for a medium effect size (Hatcher, 2013).

While the linear combination of predictor variables revealed a significant relationship with the criterion variable, the Pearson correlations indicated three of the four predictor variables did not have a significant relationship with the criterion variable (see Table 3). Since three of the four predictor variables did not have a significant relationship with the criterion variable, a simple regression was run using only growth mindset as the predictor variable. The simple linear regression yielded the following data: $r = .338$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .114$, $F(1,125) = 16.134$, $p < .001$.

Table 3

Statistics for Predictor Variables and Criterion Variable

	Self-management	Self-efficacy	Growth Mindset	Social Awareness
Moral Reasoning	.140	.108	.338	.040
Significance	.058	.114	.000***	.329

Note. ***$p < .001$.

Data from the multiple and simple regressions provide an answer to this study's research question: To what extent might components of character education—namely self-management, self-efficacy, social awareness, and growth mindset—predict moral reasoning in middle school students? Based upon the data from the multiple regression, growth mindset was the only component that bore a significant correlation with moral reasoning (.338, $p < .001$). For predictive purposes, the following equation could be applied to determine one's level of moral reasoning in accordance with changes to one's growth mindset: (Moral reasoning) = .038(Growth mindset) + 1.577.

Results from Review of Literature

While the research results identified a relationship between growth mindset and moral development, the literary sources indicated a connection between context and growth mindset.

Upon examining the research data within the context of their literary framework, three types of context emerged: cognitive (as related to individual growth mindsets), instructional (as related to schools' moral instruction), and societal (as related to society's worldview).

Cognitive Context (Growth Mindset)

The significance of growth mindset over the components of self-management, self-efficacy, and social awareness may be readily understood in light of the importance beliefs have on creating cognitive context. Not only do beliefs determine one's type of mindset (fixed or growth), but they also determine one's placement of value; consequently, mindset is a strong influencer of cognitive context (Dweck, 2017). The belief that man was designed with stretchable potential generates a growth mindset; the belief that man was developed with predetermined potential results in a fixed mindset. An individual's beliefs determine his mindset which develops his cognitive context. While self-management, self-efficacy, and social awareness address *what* a person thinks, growth mindset addresses *how* he thinks (Jones et al., 2017).

Because a growth mindset believes in—and is fueled by—its own expansion, it possesses an inquisitive nature. Rather than accepting information automatically, growth mindsets ask why and then either assimilate or dismiss a concept. Consequently, growth mindsets require engagement, a characteristic also present in moral reasoning. Of the four character components included in this study, only growth mindset actively engages with new ideas, thus identifying a purpose for learning and establishing a cognitive context for that learning. Based upon the writings of Arthur (2019), Clarà (2017), and Jiang et al., (2018), learning that is practiced is learning that is purposeful. Therefore, it should not be surprising to find growth mindset, with its questioning and engaging qualities, has a significant relationship with moral reasoning.

Instructional Context

While the literature review identified cognitive context as a contributing factor to growth mindset's significance, it also identified instructional context as a contributor to moral development. Along with the necessity of practicing moral actions, Kilpatrick (1992) included the need for understanding the purpose behind moral actions. If instructors only teach students what to do (character traits) without providing an instructional context of why to do it (moral purpose), then a disconnect may result between the learning and the doing. Adding support to the importance of a moral framework for character development, Lickona (1991) and Romanowski (2005) stated character education programs, on their own, would not create "good" students. If character components—such as self-management, self-efficacy, and social awareness—are presented as traits to perform rather than as purposes to fulfill, then students will merely borrow rather than own these practices. As long as character components remain as external behaviors, they will neither hold any influence over internal beliefs, nor have any impact upon moral development.

With post-research hindsight, a rationale emerged from the literature review as to why self-management, self-efficacy, and social awareness did not have a significant relationship with moral reasoning. Since the qualities within these three character components are neither formed by nor dependent upon beliefs and inquiry (as is true for growth mindset), no purposeful cognitive context emerged for self-management, self-efficacy, or social awareness. As a result, the disconnect between these three character components and moral reasoning implied a lack of context—both cognitive and instructional—with moral reasoning (Nelder et al., 2018; Power et al., 1989; Sakamoto, 2008; Sojourner, 2012).

Societal Context (Worldviews)

Attributing the loss of a moral conduct to a societal shift in beliefs, Schultz (2002) presented a timeline of societal views which infiltrated the American educational system. Identified in six stages (Christianization, Nationalization, Americanization, Democratization, Individualization, and Reculturization), ranging from 1620 to the present, shifts occurred regarding society's view toward reality, truth, and value. Over time, perceptions of reality descended from that which has been created by God, to that which may be explained by science, to that which might be created through science. Similarly, the source of truth degenerated from that which is found in Scripture, to that which may be explained by reason, to that which might be divulged through experience. Likewise, values declined

from that which promoted Christian living, to that which prompted good citizenship, to that which placates political correctness.

Within the void created by the removal of biblical definitions for reality, truth, and value, an alternate context redirected man's purpose and redefined man's behavior. In doing so, man's purpose shifted from glorifying God to edifying society, and man's behavior shifted from obedience to Biblical truths to adherence to man's laws (Schultz, 2002). The importance of this philosophical change should not be underestimated since societal context has long been considered vital for the development and assimilation of beliefs and behaviors (Dewey, 1909; Fowler, 1980; Hart, 1910; Kohlberg, 1980; Lickona, 1991; Power et al., 1989).

While the past and present mindsets of the American educational system provide an instructional context for reality, truth, and value, these mindsets also serve as projections of a broader societal context: worldview. Since mindsets are demonstrations of one's beliefs and values as evidenced through one's actions, they are indicative of one's worldview. By identifying the source of truth in mindsets and worldviews, a connection may be made between each educational mindset and its contextual worldview. The mindsets of Christianization and Nationalization (1620–1840) aligned with a Biblical worldview in that all three upheld God's Word as the source of truth. The mindsets of Americanization and Democratization (1840–1963) aligned with Naturalism as man turned to science and his own reason as the source of truth. The mindset of Individualization (1963–1993) aligned with Agnosticism as man's desires determined his truth; and, Reculturization (1993–present) currently aligns with Existentialism as man reveres his existence and experiences as proponents of truth (Schultz, 2002).

Research Implications and Recommendations

Implications Derived from the Study

Part-to-Whole as a Concept

At the onset, character was defined as a collection of externally teachable traits and morality was defined as an accumulation of internally assimilated traits. The distinction between these two terms (character and morality) was evidenced through their composition and their purpose, thus presenting a part-to-whole concept. From this perspective, one implication points to the need to distinguish between character programs and moral development. While character education is beneficial for the development of individual traits (such as self-management, self-efficacy, and social awareness), at best, it results in the acquisition of trainable habits. Moral growth, however, is not developed by *training the parts* of one's behavior, but by *transforming the whole* of one's behavioral context. As such, identifying the infrastructure of a character program (its whole) is as pertinent as identifying the components of a character program (its parts) for determining a program's instructional context.

Moral growth, however, is not developed by training the parts of one's behavior, but by transforming the whole of one's behavioral context

Whole-to-Part as a Precept

While moral development forms through an assimilation of collective character traits (or concepts), it also forms through an amalgamation of collective principles (or precepts). Consequently, another implication of this study is that context matters. Cognitive context serves as the infrastructure for developing concepts while instructional and societal context pour the foundation of beliefs, raise the beams of value, and attach the walls of purpose. Altogether, these three types of context create the whole, and the whole supports the parts.

The implications arising from this precept are weighty. While schools, and parents, tend to look equally upon the outward structures of character education and moral reasoning, their similarities stop with the floor plan. Though building

character and framing morality both operate off of behavioral blueprints, their differing foundations (beliefs) will affect the framework (values) and covering (purpose) of each dwelling. One implication, then, is the need for inspecting a character—or moral—program's foundational beliefs. As part of the inspection process, an examination should be made of the foundational beliefs, values, and purposes of a behavioral program, which, collectively, will reveal the program's foundational worldview.

Contribution of Context

The role of the contextual nature of worldview is crucial in light of the influence societal context has upon learning. While the need for context knowledge is prevalent in cognitive learning, perhaps its importance has been overlooked in moral development. For centuries, society has looked to, and even called upon, educators to become imparters of moral behavior (Baehr, 2016; Berkowitz et al., 2017; Dewey, 1909, 1938). Throughout these centuries, however, the call has grown louder as programs within the schoolhouse have not altered practices within society. In 1910, Joseph Hart's doctoral dissertation addressed the (then) current theories of moral education. From his perspective recorded 110 years ago, Hart attributed a break down in student behavior to a breakdown in family values. One of the remedies presented for narrowing this moral gap was the inclusion of educators in a child's moral development (Hart, 1910). While Hart's solution may have seemed pragmatic, time has shown it to be problematic, as the change in venue (public education) led to a change in instructional (moral) values.

The ineffectiveness of character education on moral development may be seen in society's continued, and unchanged, cry for schools to mold student behavior. In the years—and generations—since Hart's dissertation, society's call remains unaltered: Schools need to develop moral citizens. The call, however, overlooks the role of instructional and societal context. When man's purpose is separated from his beliefs and when his habits are juxtaposed against his values, then his behaviors will be influenced *by society* rather than being influential *for society*. What may seem like a mere prepositional change (*by* to *for*) is actually a vast positional change (from *behaviors* to *beliefs*), as the behavioral parts are determined by the contextual whole.

Recommendations for Educators

After conducting the research, the results supported—and explained—the suppositions that had initially launched the study. Having contemplated character education's propensity to promote and predict moral reasoning in students, the data confirmed the suspicion: character education is not a catalyst for moral development. Moral development stems from doctrinal seeds planted in biblical soil, and only Christian schools can provide such a nurturing context.

Though character education may be advantageous for public schools due to its influence on student achievement, social-emotional learning, and school climate (Benninga et al., 2003; Mahoney et al., 2019; Stalker et al., 2018), character programs do not have a significant effect on moral development.

While the non-significant relationship between character education and moral development was not a surprise, the significant correlation between growth mindset and moral development, and the noteworthy relationship between context and moral development, was unexpected. Though these results affect educators within public and parochial schools alike, they are particularly instrumental for Christian school educators. First of all, based upon the effect growth mindset has upon moral reasoning, Christian educators have the opportunity to maximize the relationship between growth mindset and moral development. By intentionally focusing on practices designed to "grow" mindsets (such as upholding biblical beliefs and promoting eternal values) educators within Christian schools may increase their students' level of moral development.

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development. By intentionally focusing on practices designed to "grow" mindsets (such as upholding biblical beliefs and promoting eternal values) educators within Christian schools may increase their students' level of moral development.

Additionally, growth mindsets require tending, as new beliefs about self simply, "take their place alongside…old [beliefs]" (Dweck, 2017, p. 229). Because the Christian faith identifies man as God's ultimate creation, Christian school educators have the advantage of continually reminding students of their earthly worth and of their eternal value, thereby expanding a current—while also encouraging a future—growth mindset.

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Secondly, due to the significance of context on moral development, Christian schools hold another "moral advantage." Three types of context were identified as contributors to—or deterrents of—moral development: cognitive context, instructional context, and societal context. Within each of these contexts, the Christian school holds the moral advantage. From the cognitive context, students in Christian schools may develop their belief in self through their belief in God. As being created in their Father's image, the context for children's value comes not from man but from the Maker of man. From the instructional context, educators in Christian schools have the opportunity—and responsibility—to align their teaching with the truth of Scriptures. As a result, the context for each subject becomes purposeful in light of its revelation of God. Science reveals God's handiwork; history chronicles God's presence; math deciphers God's logic and order; and language (both written and spoken) recites God's communicative nature.

Lastly, from the societal context, Christian schools may instruct students to, "examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good" (2 Thessalonians 5:17; *New American Standard Bible*). Knowing students will be faced with conflicting worldviews as they mature and become more engaged in their communities, Christian schools hold the contextual advantage when it comes to the development of a Biblical worldview.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study focused on the relationship between character education components and moral reasoning development, from which the influence of growth mindset emerged, future research may examine how growth mindsets may be enlarged so that moral reasoning may be expanded. Since growth mindsets contain a collection of components, future studies may be conducted in which individual components of growth mindset are correlated with moral reasoning to identify the strength—and possible influence—of their relationship. As a result, the effectiveness of growth mindset might be strengthened through the identification of its most morally influential components.

Another recommendation for future study might be an examination of the different types of growth mindset contained within various character education programs. According to Jones et al. (2017), upon inspecting 25 character programs, only eight programs (32%) addressed growth mindset. Additionally, within these eight programs, the components identified as growth mindset varied from promoting obedience to advocating "open-mindedness." Future studies may categorize growth mindsets according to their components and then run a correlation

between each type of mindset—whether Biblically-minded or open-minded—and moral reasoning. Since growth mindset has been found to be a significant contributor to moral reasoning, researchers may be interested in whether the type of growth mindset influences the form of moral reasoning.

Lastly, future studies might seek to uncover and identify underlying worldviews housed within character education programs. Based upon the relevance societal context has in developing and directing behaviors, identifying which character programs include growth mindset is not enough to ensure moral development. Of equal importance is identifying the societal context (worldview) from which the program was constructed or for which the program was designed. Through an examination of concepts promoted as "growth mindset," (open-mindedness versus obedience; spirituality versus spiritual) a program's structural framework may be identified and its contextual worldview may be revealed.

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