

EMPIRICALLY INFORMED CHARACTER AND LEADERSHIP EDUCATION IN FOCUSED HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOMS 15 Years of Consensus, Development, and Evaluation

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Character Development & Leadership

This 15-year program of research explored the extent to which prosocial attitudes and behavior of high school students were increased by focused lesson plans administered in dedicated high school classrooms over 1 or 2 academic semesters. The narrative describes the evolution of the Character Development and Leadership Program from a pilot study in 1 public high school to a curriculum employed by 2,000 high schools nationwide in traditional classrooms and online. First, a Delphi study provided empirically determined consensus about which character traits were most relevant to the needs of educators and students in the high school setting. This was followed by the development and evolution of a focused, highly structured classroom program to inculcate and strengthen these character traits for diverse students in socioculturally diverse high schools. Concurrent efficacy studies suggested that participating students consistently demonstrated a significant diminution of negative behavior outcomes and an increase in positive ones. These were differing kinds of studies in an exponentially growing number of real-life settings. Therefore not all data could be as complete as desired, comparison groups were not always available, and program fidelity was not always constant. Nevertheless, the evolving program and outcomes data make a composite case for the efficacy of the Character Development and Leadership Program and provide a practical illustration for other developers of empirically driven programs in character and leadership education.

Urged on by their legislatures and boards of education, many secondary schools in the United States have been searching for a comprehensive curriculum to inculcate ethical decisionmaking and leadership behavior throughout their student bodies (Davidson, Lickona, & Khmelkov, 2008).

Such a legislative mandate and two critical parameters shaped what would eventually become the Character Development and Leadership (CD&L) Program.

- The CD&L Program began in response to a challenge by a local high school

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principal. He perceived that his student body gradually had declined in the character traits and leadership behaviors that, in his opinion, drove a positive academic climate.

- He therefore wanted a direct hands-on approach to targeted high school students. He envisioned a course focused on character and leadership, one class period a day, for a semester. The first author was asked to develop that class and subsequently to teach it.
- This envisioned program would be a field study (cf. Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2011). Because field studies occur in real-life settings they characteristically lack the situational refinements and comparisons of university human science laboratories. Therefore, they are said to assess “efficacy” as opposed to “effectiveness” (cf. Fedson, 1998; Godwin et al., 2003).

The program of scholarship described below is an example of the empirically based character education recommended by Berkowitz and Bier (2005, 2007). That is, it describes 15 years of developmental research “in the trenches”. Because the projects assessed an evolving program in situ the level of full details was not always ideal. However, taken together these endeavors make a composite case for the efficacy of the CD&L Program and perhaps offer illustrations for other empirically oriented professionals to consider.

The narrative to follow describes three central developmental processes of the CD&L Program as it evolved from year 2000 through 2015, moving from a single high school elective course to manualized curricula (see Lee, 2014b) for the traditional classroom setting and also online. It currently is being used by over 2,000 high schools in the United States. These developmental processes were:

- Scientifically determined consensus about which character traits were most

relevant to the needs of educators and students in high school settings.

- The evolution of a focused classroom program to inculcate and grow these character traits, as well as leadership skills in diverse students in diverse high schools.
- Assessment of desired changes in students’ thoughts, perceptions, and behaviors.

PROCESS ONE: A SCIENTIFICALLY DERIVED CONSENSUS ABOUT WHAT IS TO BE TAUGHT

The first step was to determine the specific character traits the intervention team (educators and content experts) considered to be most relevant to the educators’ desired outcomes. The next step was to develop a corresponding list of specific, concrete behaviors presumed to reflect the presence of each trait in the educators’ school and community contexts. These behavioral descriptions are called “operational definitions” of the traits, to wit, specific indicators to be observed and tallied. This foundation was crucial not only to the current application, but for credible extensions to future programs and the valid comparison within and between future schools. A Delphi methodology (cf. Turoff & Linstone, 2002) was adopted as an empirical way to arrive at consensus relevant to the educators’ problem-centered goals. After all, comparable challenges in related fields of study had been neatly resolved using the Delphi method, for example, participatory action research in public health (Fletcher & Marchildon, 2011), innovative interventions in education planning (Helmer-Hirschberg, 1966), and financial forecasting (Green, Armstrong, & Graefe, 2007).

Method

Participants. The Delphi Method is a structured process for arriving at consensus through the use of a panel of experts. There-

TABLE 1
Members of the Delphi Panel of Experts ($N = 19$; 10 Males, 9 Females) Who Arrived at Consensus
About the Names and Behavioral Definitions of the 16 Most Relevant Character Traits
to be Taught to High School Students in a Semester Class

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- An editor of a major academic family science journal
 - The director of character education for a southeastern state, who also worked in that state's department of public instruction
 - A leader in the field of character education with a proven track record of transforming school climate and improving the character of students
 - An academic whose entire career was comprised of educational leadership positions at the undergraduate and graduate levels
 - A family and child scientist at a research-intensive land grant university
 - The long-term superintendent of a major school district in a southeastern state
 - A principal of a high school with 30 years of experience
 - The director of an at-risk mentoring program for middle-adolescent youth
 - The director of a statewide fatherhood initiative with a background in family studies, adolescent development, and family therapy
 - Two stay-at-home parents with a vested interest in their children's development
 - Two youth ministers
 - Six community stakeholders of various educational and vocational levels
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fore, the experts had to be agreed upon and recruited. The program developers wanted the Delphi panel to be a credible mix of content experts (e.g., academicians specializing in character education in the schools), those with experience with the issues at hand (e.g., high school administrators and other professionals), and lay individuals with "skin in the game" (e.g., parents of high school students and concerned community members). Based on their professional contacts and collaborations, the high school principal and the senior author together recruited the members of their Delphi panel. The principal would subsequently be a member of the panel and the senior author would facilitate its processes. The 19 participants are listed in Table 1.

Procedure. The Delphi method is an empirical way of arriving at consensus through, first, generating information and, subsequently, distilling that information in systematic reiterative cycles. In the present study the panel members operated separately and returned their responses to the facilitator. The

first task each member was given was to answer the open-ended question: "What character traits do each of you consider 'most important' if adolescent males and females are to be successful in the ninth through 12th grades and in their communities?" A definition of each trait was also required. Their collective responses were compiled by the facilitator, who discovered that further refinement of this list of traits was necessary. Its large initial size (102 traits) was partially the result of connotative redundancy and overlap. Consequently, the panelists' individual lists were returned to each member with the instruction to provide behavioral examples of each trait, namely, "What specific observable behavior would indicate to you that this trait was in operation or lacking?"

Upon completion of that task, the facilitator eliminated clear redundancies (same label and same behavior) and then sent the remaining list of traits and alleged behavioral indicators back to the panel members. Each trait and its illustrative behavior was compared to every other

trait in a paired-comparison presentation (David, 1988) using a 5-point Likert format ranging from “*very much alike*” to “*not at all alike*.” The subsequent statistical analysis indicated that some of these traits still could be assessing the same things. These traits were returned to the panel paired with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “*very much the same*” to “*not at all the same*.” The result of this process was a short list of 32 traits and their behavioral indicators, all of which the panel members agreed were important to the success of high school students, both in the classroom and out of it.

At this point a critical parameter of the field study had to be addressed: A major contextual limitation was that one trait was to be the focus of each of 16 weeks in a semester, followed by a final 2 weeks of review and conclusions using the predetermined traits “Leadership” for week 17 and “Character” for week 18. Therefore, the panel members each subsequently rank ordered the list of 32 traits according to each member’s opinion of a trait’s importance to this population, in this school setting, with regard to outcome goals, and ease of recognition.

The entire Delphi process required 18 months. The panel members were unpaid volunteers. The convergence of their opinions resulted from systematic waves of questioning and statistical analyses. Common trends were recognized and outliers were conceptually integrated or set aside. Telephonic and email confrontation of disagreements resulted in constructive insights (Dick, 2000).

Results. The resulting character traits and their operational definitions are given in Table 2. They are not rank ordered according to their average rating. This listing is how they might fit into an 18-week curriculum (cf. Hoedel, 2010), fully understanding that the final two weeks would be “leadership” and “character” and used for consolidation.

The panel thought that the first six traits might be considered foundational, that is, the floor upon which citizenship could be constructed. The next six traits were focused on

the skills necessary for positive character growth in the students’ current social environments. The last four traits addressed what good citizenship would look like and be expressed in these students’ futures.

Discussion

There was much basic agreement among the panelists by the time that the proposed traits reached the final stage. Certain traits did not make the final list simply because the number of usable weeks in a semester was limited and the proposed character education curriculum presupposed immersion in only one trait each week. Moreover, in debriefing sessions, some popular traits were eliminated because they were too difficult to define uniquely in discrete, observable behavior (e.g., “humility,” “civility,” and “good judgment”). Some popular traits struck the panel as more elementary school oriented than high school appropriate (e.g., “compassion” replaced “kindness”).

In Table 2, some traits appear to be synonymous. One such pair is “integrity” and “honesty.” However, the panel decided that each was unique. Integrity was defined as an internalized set of values that guides decisionmaking processes. Honesty was considered concern for truthfulness in one’s thoughts, responses, and behaviors, that is, the relative absence of lying, cheating, and stealing. Another apparently synonymous pair might be “appreciation” and “gratitude.” In this pair the panelists wished to distinguish between recognizing, understanding, and accepting the value of role models in their sociocultural worlds as opposed to being aware of, valuing, and inclined to use these positive resources in their lives.

This consensus list of traits includes both “moral” and “performance” character traits (cf. Davidson, 2004). The importance of both categories has been argued compellingly and empirically demonstrated in high school students (Lickona & Davidson, 2005).

From the beginning of this program of study there has been a feedback loop between

TABLE 2
 Summary of Delphi Panel Consensus: The 16 Most Important Character and Leadership Traits to be Taught to Ninth through 12th Graders and Their Average Rating ($SD < .05$) by 19 Panel Members

<i>Character Trait</i>	<i>Average Rating</i>	<i>Definition in Mid-Adolescence</i>	<i>Behaviors Indicating the Presence or Absence of trait</i>
“Foundational”			
Positive Attitude	10.0	Pro-social orientation, affirming belief systems, self-discipline	Optimism; internal causality; prosocial goals
Preparation	10.0	Priorities with realistic sub-goals	Articulating pathways to personal goals
Perseverance	10.0	Macro and micro steadfastness in school	Records of lateness, absences, completing assignments, preparation for tests; concern about grades
Respect	10.0	Good social judgment and deference to peers, educators, and self	Civility of behavior and words: Positive and negative behavioral incidents
Honesty	10.0	Respecting the truth as well as demonstrating it	Caring about and obtaining high reliability ratings by teachers and peers; The relative absence of lying, cheating, and stealing.
Integrity	10.0	Developing personal values	Owning thoughts, actions, and consequences; internal causality
“Skill Acquisition”			
Courage	9.8	Effective handling of peer group pressure; Defending beliefs and values	Recognizing skills for resisting negative peer pressure; constructive arguing in class
Appreciation	9.8	Recognizing role models and understanding their significance in one’s life	Admiring specific role models from curriculum, school, community; Identifies with model
Composure	10.0	Effectively dealing with anger and aggression	Absence of disciplinary citations, and growth in the number of positive academic and social behaviors
Empathy	9.8	Positive communication skills	Demonstrating active listening (listen, clarify, confirm, and accept multiple realities)
Gratitude	9.8	Feeling grateful for external resources	Finding and using external resources; asking for help; expressing thanks
Compassion	9.8	Concerned awareness of peer victimization	Addressing incidents of bullying; helping, not hurting, potential targets
“Positive Futures”			
Tolerance	10.0	Demonstrating tolerance for diverse populations	Accepting multiple realities; Negative reactions to out-groups versus inclusion
Service	9.8	Putting welfare of others ahead of self	Considered to be an important value; Incidents of altruism and volunteering
Loyalty	9.8	Sustaining long-term relationships	Number of friends and length of friendship; Longest time held a job; Longest time in romantic relationship; School pride
Responsibility	9.8	Cultivating employability in the workplace	Showing initiative, being present and on time, completing assignments, grade point average

Note: The conceptual and operational definitions of each are included.

consumers and the author and his panelists. Over the years, teachers and administrators have suggested traits that were not considered in the first study. For example, “apathy” has been characterized by several of them as “Public Enemy #1” in their middle and high schools. Opposites to apathy might be “grit”, “desire,” and “determination.” Also, others have regretted the absence of “fairness.” They have not been convinced that it is embedded in “honesty.” In any case, for the past decade the 16 traits in Table 2 have been at the core of an evolving character education curriculum (described later and in Hoedel, 2010).

PROCESS TWO: CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Having determined the most desirable character traits to be taught to ninth- through 12th-grade students, the next procedure was to develop lesson plans considered most likely to succeed. The high school principal had already specified the format in his request for help. He wanted a stand-alone, semester-long class focused on character education and leadership. He believed, as did his consultants, that inculcation and nurturing of character traits takes time. Lesson plans were required that made good use of that format.

This task was undertaken by some local members of the Delphi panel, namely, the senior author, the family and child scientist, the high school principal, the two youth ministers, and the director of the mentoring program for at-risk adolescents. They decided that:

1. The key structural elements of the initial curriculum would begin with empirically derived pedagogical practices (so-called “best practices”), namely, the classroom management practices of highly effective high school teachers (e.g., Anderman, Andrzejewski, & Allen, 2011; Berkowitz, 2009; Corso, Bundick, Quaglia, & Haywood, 2013), and experts in efficacious character education (e.g., “what

works” by Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Berkowitz, Bier, & McCauley, 2016; the “four keys” highlighted by Davidson, Fisher, & Lickona, 2009; the “11 principles” designated by character.org, 2010).

2. A consistent and predictable format would be explicitly employed (i.e., students knew what to expect on a daily basis and could prepare for it).
3. Content would be relevant to the students, and focused on specific, realistic, and doable behavioral outcomes.
4. Lesson plans would employ credible and relevant anecdotal illustrations and have students identify role models in their immediate environments. Relevant cultural icons also would be provided.
5. Students would be active learners.
6. Students would be required to interpret, summarize, present, and debate lessons in writing and also in the spoken word. Concurrently their group process would be identified and addressed.
7. The curriculum would be characterized by repetition, multimedia illustrations, and discussion of merits and applications.
8. Teachers would encourage enactment of the lessons learned on campus and in community service.

This pedagogical structure was accepted as fundamental. However, those involved in the program understood that refinement could occur as the number and diversity of participating institutions increased. Therefore, continuous feedback mechanisms were built into their system: Mandated but anonymous written commentary by the students at the conclusion of the term, local and regional meetings with participating teachers and administrators, local and regional trainings and workshops, and—most recently—online blogs and newsletters for all student and adult participants. Based on this feedback the curriculum is now characterized by multifaceted presentations and projects designed to effectively interface with diverse student learning styles. In addition, the program’s content and processes were brought

into alignment with the English Language Arts (ELA) and English Language Development (ELD) common core standards. This was in response to feedback relative to integration of character education in the overall academic curriculum, as well as awareness of funding opportunities. Recommendations from administrators and teachers most recently resulted in a totally online curriculum. Partly the online version was to address financial nuances and partly to oblige the national push for citizen comfort and competency in the computer age (e.g., Flint, 2014).

Illustration of Curriculum Structure and Its Evolution

Relevant Material in a Consistent and Predictable Format

A consistent format of 10 lesson plans was developed to teach each of the 16 traits, with two more units for consolidation of that which has been learned (180 total lesson plans). This template created a consistent learning environment—everyone in the classroom knew what to expect and when to prepare. Table 3 highlights the 16 traits that were paired with the 16 unit topics, followed by the consolidation units. Table 4 highlights the 10 lesson plans employed to teach each of 18 units.

This structure was put into an evolving teacher’s manual (for example, Hoedel, 2012). However, student and teacher feedback indicated that, although most programs were conducted according to the manual, there were others that were not (see *Modes of Implementation* section for what the situation is and how it is being addressed). Therefore the word “unit” meaning a learning module, has replaced “weekly.”

Learning Styles

The 10 lesson plans embedded in each unit specifically align with the diverse learning styles of students (see updated review in

TABLE 3
The Topics and Their Associated Traits

<i>18 Unit Topics</i>	<i>Traits of Study</i>
Orientation and Expectations	Attitude
Developing Goals and Priorities	Preparation
The Importance of Education	Perseverance
Showing Respect to Others	Respect
Building a Positive Reputation	Honesty
Developing Personal Values	Integrity
Handling Peer Pressure	Courage
The Importance of Role Models	Appreciation
Managing Anger and Aggression	Composure
Positive Communication Skills	Empathy
Expressing Gratitude to Parents	Gratitude
Cultural Competence	Tolerance
Citizenship in the Community	Service
Sustaining Long-term Relationships	Loyalty
Employability and Workplace Skills	Responsibility
Addressing Bullying in Your School	Compassion
Review and Consolidation	Leadership
Review and Consolidation	Character

Note: Each pair (“unit”) is expected to be taught across 18 successive school weeks. The last two pairs are for consolidation of what has been learned.

Moussa, 2014). Increasingly students have considered the concepts of character and leadership through multimedia interactions with the subject matter. There always is didactic, passive learning, such as, lectures about leadership principles. But there also are more active tasks incorporating multiple ways of knowing: Reading (role model readings), writing (writing assignments, blog posts and responses), video presentations (movies exemplifying positive character traits), oral presentations and processing (e.g., small and large group discussion of ethical dilemmas), and exploration of the group process with regard to basic social skills. Finally, as noted above, in 2014 the CD&L curriculum was modified and expanded to instruct students using a 100% online platform (e.g., schools providing indi-

TABLE 4
Ten Consistent Lesson Plans Employed to Teach the 18 Character and Leadership Traits

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- **Lesson Plan 1—Quotation Exercise:** This is an informal, low-stress way to introduce the trait and topic. Traits are defined and quotations from both historical and anonymous individuals are provided. Students provide short-answer responses about the context and meaning of the quotations, followed by classroom discussion.
 - **Lesson Plan 2—Ethical Dilemma:** Real-life scenarios are used to challenge students to contemplate choices, options, consequences, and different points of view, to help them with critical thinking skills and judgment. Students provide written, short answers and then participate in debate/discussion.
 - **Lesson Plan 3—Lecture:** Students receive weekly direct instruction and collaborative question prompts from research-based lectures supported with curriculum-provided Power Points, visuals and handouts.
 - **Lesson Plan 4—Character Movies:** Students view, discuss and debate selected scenes from appropriate popular movies that embody the featured character trait. Verbal and/or written responses to follow up questions challenge students to critically analyze these video segments from multiple points of reference.
 - **Lesson Plan 5—Role Model Readings:** A textbook has been written which provides the biographies of 17 role models who exemplify each of the 17 traits covered in the curriculum. Each week students read a 10-page biographical narrative about a historical or contemporary person. Chapter quizzes and discussion questions spur in-depth analysis of each featured role model.
 - **Lesson Plan 6—Community Role Model:** Understanding that “true” role models resided in the students’ community (i.e., lived in the same neighborhoods, graduated from the same schools, and looked like the students), community leaders are brought into the classroom each week to reinforce the importance of the character traits covered in the class. The speakers tell personal stories, provide life lessons, and encourage students to reach their full potential.
 - **Lesson Plan 7—Basic Skills:** Practical and essential skills are provided for each module to help students become successful in school and beyond. Almost all of these skills are behavioral in nature, so differences can be observed immediately.
 - **Lesson Plan 8—Blog:** An online blog provides a positive, negative, or controversial current event related to character and leadership. An overview and a link to a short news video is provided along with the blogger’s (developer, Joe Hoedel) perspective. Follow up discussion questions seek to inspire students to contemplate the importance of character and leadership in today’s society.
 - **Lesson Plan 9—Leadership Principles:** Virtual lectures on 17 leadership principles are provided on the website by various leaders. Students will learn the key components of timeless leadership, which will help them become successful in school, career and their personal lives. Discussion and social media questions accompany each principle.
 - **Lesson Plan 10—Expository Writing Assignment:** Students write expository or persuasive essays about core beliefs and character related issues. This serves as a final academic written assignment that students will present in a formal oral presentation to classmates.
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vidual laptops allowing virtual and distance learning opportunities).

Alignment With ELA & ELD Common Core Standards

The Common Core Standards have been adopted by most states (cf. Common Core Standards, 2015). Current and potential users of the CD&L Program have observed that its curriculum could be structured to meet both ELA and ELD standards and be integrated into the high school academic curricula. It thereby could serve a dual purpose, namely, teach pro-

social values while improving English proficiency (cf., Character Development & Leadership, 2016a). This dual feature was subsequently achieved for the CD&L Program by a panel of English teachers from a large western state. At the conclusion of a 6-month process, the panel agreed that the CD&L Program supported:

- 80% of the ELA College & Career Readiness Anchor Standards;
- 75% of the 8, 9 & 10 ELA Speaking, Listening, Reading & Writing Standards; and

- 60% of the 11& 12 ELA Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing Standards.

This alignment has allowed many secondary schools to use the CD&L Program to receive English credit while also getting financial support for it. A one-for-one demonstration of each of the above Core Standards and the CD&L Program's ways of fulfilling it is available at Character Development and Leadership (2016a). A case study of a successful application in an alternative high school setting (Hoedel & Lee, 2017) is summarized below.

Modes of Implementation

The CD&L Program was initially taught as a stand-alone for-credit course on a block (90 minute) schedule. While the “weekly format” hasn't changed, approximately 40% of the 2,000 schools nationwide do not use it in the original manner (Character Development and Leadership Program, 2016b). For example, hundreds of schools use a homeroom format, extending the 180 lesson plans to cover 3 or 4 years of instruction without redundancy. Some choose to integrate this program in already existing classes, such as JROTC, health, physical education, business, and career management. Some schools prefer to focus on seniors, some on at-risk freshmen. Some use it as an elective (e.g., for student body government members). Some schools require their students to take the course as a requirement for graduation. In contrast, some school districts prefer using the CD&L Program in a middle school setting. From its inception schools have had the freedom to choose how to implement the CD&L Program in order to meet their unique goals and objectives. Ironically, while facilitating its acceptance, this freedom of implementation has presented challenges to the developers' mission of empirical development and validation. These program evaluation challenges will be discussed in the final section.

PROCESS THREE: EMPIRICAL VALIDATION OF CURRICULUM

Since 2001, over 2,000 schools from all 50 states have participated in the evolving Character Development and Leadership Program (2015). Many of these have voluntarily participated in process and outcome evaluation, and the results have been used to continuously modify the program. The findings to date are summarized below. This compilation is timely. There may be a sea change occurring in contemporary secondary education. These predicted changes involve diverse online materials and distance learning. Outcome results from the emerging online programs will need to be compared to those based in traditional classrooms.

Although there have been continuous adjustments informed by the experiences of program administrators, institutional staff, and students—such as, replacing individual role models, expanding the videotape library, adding an interactive blog, and adding writing requirements—outcomes assessment has been in place from the beginning (see Hoedel, 2005, 2005).

The original CD&L semester-long class took place in academic years 2001–2003 at a suburban North Carolina high school (<http://www.characterandleadership.com/research>). A wait-listed comparison group experimental design involving 80 students assessed whether or not participation in the CD&L Program was appealing to these students and associated with improved school attendance, fewer in-school disciplinary occurrences, and higher grade point averages. The attendant student records supported the notion that this was so. Based on these pilot data the CD&L class was promoted at regional education conferences and workshops.

First Formal Outcomes Assessment: North Carolina High Schools

Pursuant to these presentations, the CD&L Program was voluntarily purchased by and

implemented in 74 North Carolina high schools in the 2003–2005 academic years. This was fortuitous:

- The North Carolina Legislature in 2001 mandated that every public school in North Carolina develop and implement a plan to teach character education (House Bill 195 - <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/charactereducation/>).
- The CD&L lesson plans had been compiled into a manual that these educators could apply immediately (cf., Hoedel, 2012).

Research Questions

There were four research questions. Would students who participated in the CD&L program, unlike those in comparison groups, have better attendance, fewer in-school suspensions, increased grade point averages (GPA), and higher rates of passing the 9th grade End of Course (EOC) Tests administered under the No Child Left Behind Act (see New America Foundation, 2014).

Method

Procedures

All 74 institutions were invited to be a part of this study. To be included in the outcomes assessment, a high school had to contribute one ninth-grade, semester-long class devoted to the CD&L curriculum. Moreover, the teacher of that class had to participate in a one-day on-site training seminar. Finally, the participating high schools had to submit official office data on attendance, suspensions, grade point averages, and passage of the EOC Tests. Most of the schools agreed to these criteria, but only 28 schools (38%) sufficiently followed through. Most agreed to provide comparison groups of “like” freshmen, but only four schools met the requirements for the comparison groups (that is, they provided official office data). Random assignment of the

groups was recommended and sometimes adhered to, but other principals selected teachers they considered “responsible enough” to follow through on the procedures of the study. Therefore, sometimes the homeroom teacher was randomly assigned and sometimes the teacher was selected based on a track record of being “responsible”.

Subjects

A total of 825 ninth-grade students completed the semester-long CD&L Program. At that time a semester was 92 instructional days, and the CD&L course was taught daily in a dedicated homeroom setting to approximately 30 students at each school. The corresponding comparison students were enrolled in traditional homerooms wherein the students focused on homework from their core classes. Because both groups derived from the same school settings, the CD&L and comparison students were similar in demographic makeup: Their schools were urban, suburban, or rural, and situated in white and blue collar neighborhoods as well as those characterized by unemployment and poverty. Accordingly, their student populations were socioculturally and socioeconomically diverse. The data in Table 5 demonstrate that, at the start of this study, the CD&L and the comparison groups of students were comparable in their aggregate attendance records, grade point averages, and school disciplinary events.

Results

The data in Table 6 are the “before and after” results for the students in the CD&L and comparison groups. The predata were from these students’ school records describing their last semester (last half of the eighth grade). These data then were compared with the same data at the conclusion of the semester in which the CD&L Program was provided. Each block of data was acquired from a 92-instructional-day experience.

TABLE 5
The Comparability of the CD&L Participants ($N = 825$) and Students in the Comparison Group ($n = 160$) at the Beginning of Study According to School Attendance, GPA, and ISS

Measure	Days Attended	n	SD	t	df	Significance (1 Tailed)
CD&L Participants	72.30	825	2.181			
Comparison Group	72.01	160	1.810	2.7	159	Statistically not significant
Measure	GPA					
CD&L Participants	2.10	825	0.720			
Comparison Group	2.40	160	0.459	2.019	159	Statistically not significant
Measure	In school suspensions					
CD&L Participants	1.90	825	1.240			
Comparison Group	1.96	160	1.186	3.256	159	Statistically not significant

Note: The number of instructional days in their school districts was 178 and their GPAs could range between 0.0 and 4.0. T tests of the differences between their aggregate averages demonstrate that they are comparable groups.

TABLE 6
Before and After School Attendance, GPA, and ISSs Comparing CD&L Participants ($n = 825$) and Students in the Comparison Group ($n = 160$)

Days Attended	Before	After	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
CD&L participants	72.30 ($SD = 2.181$)	81.25 ($SD = 2.575$)					
Comparison Group	72.01 ($SD = 1.810$)	72.00 ($SD = 1.825$)	27.022	1	27.022	5.447	0.049
GPA							
CD&L participants	2.10 ($SD = 0.720$)	2.60 ($SD = 0.450$)					
Comparison group	2.40 ($SD = 0.459$)	2.32 ($SD = 0.570$)	2.503	1	2.503	9.569	0.002
ISS							
CD&L participants	1.90 ($SD = 1.240$)	1.0 ($SD = 0.800$)					
Comparison group	1.96 ($SD = 1.186$)	2.3 ($SD = 1.180$)	3.120	1	3.120	5.537	0.049

Note: The number of instructional days in the school district is 178. Grades in classes range from 0.0 to 4.0. Two-way analysis of variance has been employed. Statistical significance (Sig.) is an F value $< .05$.

In that time the group participating in the CD&L course increased their average attendance from 72 days (78%) the previous semester to 81 days (88%) in the just-completed semester. In contrast those students who did

not take the CD&L course remained the same (72 days average attendance each semester). Students who took the CD&L course also improved their group's average GPA from 2.1 (for their last 8th grade semester) to 2.6 at the

conclusion of their CD&L semester. In contrast, the average GPA of the comparison group, compiled at the same time, decreased from 2.4 to 2.3. Moreover, the students who participated in the CD&L Program averaged only one in-school suspension during that semester, whereas freshmen who did not take the course averaged 2.3 in-school suspensions in that same period of time. Two-way analyses of variance of these data are summarized in Table 6. The improvements in the CD&L students are all statistically significant.

Moreover, although the comparison high schools did not provide these data, CD&L participants bettered their scores on the end of course English and mathematics assessments administered under No Child Left Behind. The previous year, at the end of the 8th grade, only 45% of these students had passed their 8th grade EOC examination in English and only 25% passed their EOC eighth-grade mathematics test. However, at the end of their participation in the CD&L Program, 71% of the students passed their ninth-grade EOC English test and 47% passed their ninth-grade mathematics EOC test.

In addition, on an anonymous survey (see description of the Student Self Report Survey and its revision—SSRS and SSRS-R—below), at the end of their CD&L class, the participants reported that they engaged in less antisocial behavior in their schools (e.g., stealing, bullying, and cheating) and risky behavior (e.g., drinking, smoking, using substances in automobiles) in their communities. They also indicated that they were more optimistic about graduating from high school and going to college. There were no comparison data from the non-CD&L sample.

Discussion

Over a 2-year period, CD&L participants in the ninth grade demonstrated statistically significant improvements (attendance, GPA, and diminution of school disruptive behaviors). A comparison group comprised of ninth graders from the same schools who were not in the

CD&L Program did not exhibit these changes. This discovery encouraged the developers of the CD&L Program to extend it to an increasingly wider population of high schools across the country. After all, there has long been concern about the challenging transition from middle school to high school (cf. Habeeb, 2013). Therefore, interventions focused on this educational developmental step seem prudent. However, the biopsychosocial challenges of middle adolescence do not end with completion of the ninth grade (Aprile, 2008). Consequently, developers of the CD&L Program wanted to explore its benefits with students in other grades in diverse high school programs across the nation.

Subsequent Studies Based on the Original Student Self Report Survey (SSRS) and Its Revision (SSRS-R)

The successive national studies are compiled as Table 7. From 2006 to the present date, the number of participating schools and students has exponentially increased. This has been at the expense of no longer obtaining outcome data from student records and a loss of comparison groups. Educational administrators and the teachers assigned to classes wanted neither to meet the obligations of The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 nor the work involved in culling student files. Moreover, teachers with classes of non-participating students especially felt disinclined to take on these duties in order to provide untreated comparison groups (lead author, personal observations documented in field notes).

Despite these obstacles perhaps a third of the participating schools had their students complete a standardized self-report survey (SSRS until 2015–2016; SSRS-R thereafter) prior to and at the completion of their CD&L Program. Outcomes were assessed by CD&L's research director. There were 87 items in this self-report. They were taken from those observable behaviors originally provided by the Delphi panel (see Table 2, column three).

In this self-report, students indicated the frequency of undesirable school behaviors (truancy, lateness, cheating, stealing, theft, and substance use). They also indicated the extent to which they were informed by prosocial attitudes and character traits, and engaged in prosocial acts (standing up for a beleaguered student, resisting peer pressure, demonstrations of altruism, and so on).

Finally, the students indicated the extent to which they predicted the learned character traits would be connected to success in their present and future lives, including their academic progress. Review of these self-reports suggested that they were credible. Both the “before” and “after” surveys consistently contained many revelations of substance use, theft, cheating, and bullying. Many students also made very bold disparaging statements about their teachers (e.g., “He is a dick”), their classmates (e.g., “Some talk too much,” “Too much noise and distractions”), the class (e.g., “boring,” “worthless,” “easy grade”), the textbook (e.g., “boring,” “Who cares?”), and their participation (e.g., “It’s just something to do during the day”). Overall, although student feedback has been predominantly positive over the years, there always has been a smaller but outspoken chorus of negative voices (about 10%–15% annually).

In 2015 (Lee, 2015b), the SSRS was reevaluated using known group expectations and psychometric assessment of its structure. That is, confirmatory factor analysis assessed the degree to which the SSRS items were assessing the cluster of attitudes and behaviors it was thought to assess. Seven major factors emerged and they clearly involved the hypothesized antisocial and prosocial tendencies:

- antisocial behavior in school (5 survey questions);
- lack of character strength in school and community (6 survey questions);
- optimism about mainstream life goals (9 survey questions);
- demonstration of prosocial character traits (17 survey questions);
- external versus internal causality (5 survey questions);
- exhibition of socioemotional intelligence (“emotional IQ”; 11 survey questions); and
- honestly in pursuit of goals (5 survey questions).

SSRS survey questions that did not significantly contribute to these seven factors and those which were redundant were eliminated. Accordingly the 87 survey questions of the SSRS were reduced to 58. However, five new items thought to assess student resilience were added (e.g., external causality, openness to outside help, affirming belief systems). In addition, 15 “critical items” were added to the post-CD&L Program student self-report. These questions inquired into the incidence of serious behaviors that in the past were infrequently cited but the presence or absence of which might be of interest to school administrators. Ten of these questions had to do with unsafe behaviors on the part of the respondents over the course of the semester (e.g., their use of illicit substances, drunk driving). Five other questions inquired into student security (e.g., incidence of robbery, assault, and so on.). The revised survey (SSRS-R) is given as an appendix.

Annual or biennial research outcome studies based on these student surveys were completed by CD&L personnel and given to the participating schools as technical reports (see Table 7: Weikert, 2008, 2009, 2010; Lee, 2014a, 2015a, 2016). CD&L Programs in each of these years uniformly obtained statistically significant decreases in undesirable behaviors and increases in prosocial behavior and attitudes. For example, in the 2009–2010 academic year all four antisocial clusters and two of 5 prosocial clusters were statistically significant pre- and post-CD&L Program (for details, see Table 7). Concurrently, with the exception of a few outliers, participating students have overwhelmingly placed the CD&L Program in the top tier of their high school academic experiences with regard to interest and influence.

TABLE 7
Summary of CD&L Program Outcomes Research from 2006 through 1015

<i>Academic Years</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Statistically Significant Changes Associated With CD&L Participation ($p < .05$, One-Tailed Tests)</i>
2006–2008	Weikert	2,632 male and female 9th–12th graders from 72 schools	Significant positive self-reported changes in 3 of 4 antisocial and 3 of 5 prosocial clusters of attitudes and behaviors.
2009–2010	Weikert	1,344 male and female 9th–12th graders from 34 high schools	Significant positive self-reported changes in all 4 antisocial and 2 of 5 prosocial clusters of attitudes and behaviors.
2012–2014	Lee	1,574 9th–12th male and female students from 34 schools	Significant decrease in absences, tardies, fights, and suspensions. Overall positive changes in prosocial attitude and behaviors but not evenly across the expected clusters.
2014–2015	Lee	999 male and female 9th–12th graders from 32 schools	Significant decreases in all 6 antisocial school behaviors: absences, tardies, theft, fights, suspensions, and cheating; and plagiarism; Moderate increase in all prosocial behaviors, such as, demonstrations of positive values, “Emotional IQ,” and optimism in pursuit of mainstream goals.
2015–2016	Lee	3,232 male and female middle and high school students from 27 schools	Significant decreases in not following school rules, fighting, in-school suspensions, cheating and plagiarism, theft, and bullying. Statistically insignificant positive shifts in prosocial attitudes and behaviors.

Note: Each study compared self reports submitted anonymously by high school students at the beginning and at the conclusion of their CDL classes. There were no comparison groups.

Because there were no comparison groups, the CD&L Program students’ self-described changes in their attitudes and behaviors could not be firmly attributed to the specifics of CD&L Program participation. After all, the students were 6 months older at the end of their CD&L participation and some changes could be the result of developmental maturation. It also is possible that the positive changes were not related to the program content, but occurred because the students were being observed, had volunteered, experienced nonassessed environmental changes, and so on (see Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012).

Assessing the Results of Using the CD&L Program to Meet Common Core English Language Standards

In a case study described elsewhere (Hoedel & Lee, 2017), the Character Develop-

ment and Leadership program replaced an alternative high school’s traditional English language offerings. A nontreated comparison group of students who were enrolled in the high school the academic year previous to the use of the CD&L Program were compared to the students who entered the high school the year the CD&L Program was initiated and the year following. Those students who participated in the CD&L Program attended more days (see Figure 2) and passed more courses each semester with higher grade point averages. For more extensive data, including prosocial attitudinal and behavioral advances, the readers are referred to the actual publication.

Discussion: Progress, Limitations, and Lessons Learned

The three studies with comparison samples—pilot, North Carolina Schools, alternative

education—demonstrate that the CD&L Program is associated with discernible diminution of antisocial behaviors and advances in prosocial behavior and attitudes in schools and communities. Moreover, all the outcome studies that have been based only on student self-reports before and at the end of the CD&L program—in the absence of comparison groups—also support the benefits of such a program. Moreover, most participating students have regarded the CD&L Program enthusiastically, both in terms of capturing their interest and influencing them in a positive manner.

Choosing to intervene directly with students in specialized classrooms is mildly at odds with contemporary thinking in character education (cf. Berkowitz, Battistich, & Bier, 2008; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). The overriding theoretical orientation has been that it is the school's culture which results in substantive sustained change in its students (cf. reviews and discussions in Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; character.org, 2010; Josephson, 2015; Levingston, 2009; Lickona, 1992, Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Liston, 2014; Mackenzie & Mackenzie, 2010). Nevertheless, over a decade ago Berkowitz and Bier (2004, 2007) observed that character education in the schools often had not been research driven and empirically assessed. They then listed interventions that had been empirically based. But only two interventions addressed high school students (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). Moreover, neither of these had explored the efficacy of continuous lesson-based interventions in the classroom, that is, specialized classes lasting a full semester or longer. This paper suggests that this may be an additional way to improve the character of students and the climate of a school.

Nevertheless, it is important to appreciate that the entire program of study detailed in this paper has taken place “in the trenches” and not in sophisticated institutional research settings. Therefore, there are limitations in the CD&L Program outcome studies and what has

allegedly been discovered to date. These limitations involve:

- **Evaluation of a dynamic developmental process.** Since 2001, over 2,000 schools from all 50 states have participated in the evolving Character Development and Leadership Program (2015), but not all at the same time. Almost all of these schools voluntarily participated in process and outcome evaluation, and the results have been used to continuously modify the program. For example, a textbook of role model biographies was added in 2004 and, from 2005 to 2012, some role models were dropped and new ones added so that they remained relevant to the additional cohorts of students. For the same reason the library of recommended character movies—one per unit—has been continually updated. Technological advances also allowed the development of an interactive online blog, replete with updated videotaped vignettes which allow the students to analyze current events related to character and leadership. This blog gives the teacher a weekly lesson plan that is always current and relevant. Finally, with the advent of the Common Core, emphasis was placed on aligning the CD&L classes with the common core standards for English, which placed an emphasis on speaking, listening, reading and writing. In particular, students were required to write weekly expository papers on their core beliefs and “big picture” ideas and then to provide oral presentations using good public speaking skills in front of their CD&L peers. These ongoing changes have been prompted and shaped through feedback from students, teachers, and the anonymous written critiques and suggestions at the end of their programs by the students. Because these changes were incorporated for the CD&L Program as a whole at the beginning of each

academic year, each year should be appreciated in its own right. With a program in flux, out in the field, one looks for signs of continuous desirable outcomes.

- ***Two thirds of the outcomes assessments rely on student self-reports.*** Having the students assess themselves will always be crucial. These surveys indicate the extent to which the students believe that they are internalizing prosocial traits. Their self-reports have shown remarkable candor (e.g., admission of substance use, cheating and plagiarism, etc.). Nevertheless, outcome assessment needs to consistently include academic and disciplinary records in order to determine to what extent the participants' actual behavior matches their professed beliefs as well as the short-term behavioral outcomes desired by teachers and administrators. Aggregate culling and analysis of school records will preserve the students' right to privacy.
- ***Two thirds of the outcomes assessments do not employ comparison groups.*** Attributions of positive outcomes can only be strictly attributable to the CD&L Program if well-conceived comparison groups are used. Otherwise, there is no way to know if prosocial attitudes and behavior have resulted from normal maturation influenced by the sociocultural context of their school (cf., Ford & Lerner, 1992), or by the special attention students have received during the course of this program.
- **Program fidelity has been an ongoing challenge.** Although there is an operations manual (Hoedel, 2012) and a training on DVD, how best to implement the CD&L program often has been left to the consumers—those “in the trenches”—to decide how to best implement it based on their resources, priorities, and objectives. Consequently, schools have implemented the CD&L

curriculum in a variety of highly nuanced ways. This flexibility may have helped schools become more successful with this program, but it has also made the results of efficacy studies more nebulous. The problem is that attributing outcomes to a manualized program can only be as valid as its users follow the dictates of the operations manual. Interested parties must be assured that those who are allegedly using this curriculum are rigorously trained using the operations manual, and that they faithfully follow its instructions. This so-called “program fidelity” is sustained by continuing oversight of how the program is being administered and program-long feedback between developers and users. (See Lee, 2014b, for a detailed discussion of this matter.)

- **The sustainability of perceived changes.** Finally, how does one know that the changes thought to be produced by the CD&L Program continue after participation is over? Longitudinal studies are needed both in the school context (for example, ninth graders' success in their remaining high school years) and in the postgraduation and young adult era. Such studies also hold the promise of illuminating what ecosystemic variables influence positive and negative characterological challenges and resources during these important developmental eras. (See discussions and methodologies offered by Lerner & Callina, 2014; VanLaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001).

CONCLUSION

In a direct response to a community request the CD&L Program has spent the past 15 years ascertaining the extent to which a high dosage, well-conceived, and consistent character education curriculum for high school students in a dedicated classroom can change students' lives

in the school setting. The school principal who first requested this program assumed that, if a cohesive, comprehensive, sequenced course of study moved students in a prosocial direction, the social systems (classrooms and campus) of which they were a living part would also become more prosocial. The school would get cadres of leaders and mentors to instigate, celebrate, and support positive social growth in the student body.

This article narrates the logical first steps in evolving a program of scientifically based pedagogy. It has employed best empirical practices to achieve consensus about what character traits should be cultivated in focused classrooms for contemporary ninth through 12th graders for mainstream success. It has acquired a somewhat uneven but consistent program of outcome determination. It has created and sustained a continuous feedback loop between program developers, evaluators, and consumers. The mission remains ongoing, to wit, the evolution of a character education program for middle adolescents in their schools that not only is student-friendly but also is informed both by theory and empirical data.

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APPENDIX: THE REVISED STUDENT SELF REPORT SURVEY (SSRS-R)

Post-program Survey		
Date	Year	20__
Semester	Fall (1) — Spring (2)	
My grade	6th through 8th — 9 — 10 — 11-12	
My teacher is	Alphanumeric	
My gender is	female 1, male 2	
I consider myself	Native American (1) - Black (2) — Asian(3) —Hispanic (4) —White (5) —Mixed Race (6)	
I'm taking this class because	I signed up for this elective (1) — I was told I had to (2) — This is part of my Homeroom/Advisory period (3) — It's required for graduation (4)	
I am looking forward to this class	No (1) — I don't care (2) — Yes (3).	
UNDESIRABLE ATTRIBUTES		-11 questions-
Antisocial behavior in school		
About how many times did the following things happen this semester? (5 questions)		"I got in trouble for not following school rules"
About once a week (1) About once a month (2) 2 or 3 times last semester (3) 1 time last semester (4) Never (5)	"I was put on an in-school suspension"	
		"I was suspended or put on probation from school"
		"My parents received a warning from school"
		"I got into a physical fight at school"
Lack of character strength in school and community		
About how many times did the following things happen this semester? (6 questions)		"I cheated on an exam"
About once a week (1) About once a month (2) 2 or 3 times last semester (3) 1 time last semester (4) Never (5)	"I plagiarized or shared answers on a homework assignment"	
		"I stole something from a store, friend, or relative"
		"I lied to a friend or relative"
		"I picked on another student"
		"I gave into peer pressure when I knew I shouldn't have"
DESIRABLE ATTRIBUTES		
Optimism about mainstream life goals		-48 questions-
Think about the future. How sure are you? (9 questions)		"I will graduate from high school"
I don't believe it (1) I have much doubt (2) I believe it could happen (3) I am pretty sure it will happen (4) I am convinced of it (5)	"I will go to college"	
		"I will have a job that pays well"
		"I will have a job that I enjoy doing"
		"I will have a happy family life"
		"I will be respected in my community"
		"I will have good friends I can count on"
		"Life will turn out better for me than it has for my parents"
Mainstream prosocial values		
How often this semester do you demonstrate each of the following traits? (17 questions)		Positive attitude
Always (1) Often (2) Occasionally (3) Rarely (4) Never (5)	Preparation	
		Perseverance
		Respect
		Honesty
		Integrity
		Courage
		Appreciation
		Composure; self control of anger and behavior
		Empathy
		Gratitude
		Tolerance
		Sacrifice
		Loyalty
		Responsibility
		Compassion
		Leadership
Internal Causality		
As things are right now, how convinced are you? (5 questions)		"The traits listed in the 17 questions are important for my future success"
Highly disagree (1) Somewhat disagree (2) I don't know (3) Somewhat agree (4) Agree very much (5)	"My decisions and hard work will make me successful"	
		"I know how to set goals to get important things done"
		"I shouldn't put off things that need doing"
		"I know how to get help from others if I need it"

