THE CHARACTER OF ACHIEVEMENT
An Analysis of Teachers' Instructional Practices for Character Education

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INTRODUCTION

From kindergarten classrooms to college campuses, educators are becoming increasingly invested in developing students' character in addition to their intellect (Seider, 2012; Tough, 2012). Concurrently, research contributions in education, social and positive psychology, and developmental sciences are helping to build a more active and visible field of study related to character (Damon & Learner, 2006). Much of this practitioner and scholarly interest in character stems from studies demonstrating the positive association between character strengths and important academic and social outcomes (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Heckman, Humphries, & Kautz, 2014; Seider, Gilbert, Novick, & Gomez, 2013).

Despite a growing body of scholarship that demonstrates the positive association of character and life outcomes, findings related to the efficacy of programs designed to develop character are mixed. In a comprehensive report commissioned by the Character Education Partnership (CEP), Berkowitz and Bier (2005) investigated 69 research studies of 33 different character education programs and concluded that character education influenced a variety of outcomes, including academic success. In contrast, a study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. DOE, 2010) examined the effects of seven social and character development programs, together as well as separately for 3 years. The study's researchers found that, while the introduction of these programs led to an increased focus on social and character development instruction, the seven social and character development programs when analyzed individually or collectively did not improve student outcomes. The discrepancy in findings between the CEP and U.S. DOE-commissioned reports is likely attributable to two methodological decisions: (1) the definition of character and character education, and (2) a limited study of teachers' classroom practices versus school-level efforts related to character instruction.

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Questions of programmatic efficacy are important, but a singular focus on school-level programs obscures the impact teachers—regardless of schoolwide efforts—have on the development of character. Often referred to as the hidden curriculum of schooling (Dreeben, 1968), the decisions teachers make—from the amount of academic support given to opportunities to work with peers to disciplinary systems, among countless others—influence students' character development. Yet, teachers vary in their intentionality to make decisions that positively impact students' character (Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993). Variations in teacher intentionality are, in part, due to the near absence of character and other related topics in most teacher education programs (Lickona, 1993; Milson, 2003; Ryan & Bolin, 1999). More than a decade ago, the National Commission on Character Education commissioned a report on the status of incorporating character education into teacher education programs. Overall, they discovered that there were varying approaches to character education but that teacher education programs reported more success when they made character education foundational to the program of study (Williams & Schaps, 1999).

The research reported here sheds insight on the discrepancies in the observed programmatic outcomes of character education by examining teachers' instructional practices related to character, using theoretically and empirically relevant measures of character strengths and teacher practice. The study design includes K–8 teachers enrolled in the same character education course. By selecting a population of teachers with shared learning experiences related to character, the study also examines the ways in which teacher education influences teachers' practices related to character instruction. Using their final assignment, a lesson plan with at least one objective aligned to a character strength, we find that a majority of teachers selected achievement character strengths (Duckworth, Tsukayama, & Patrick 2014), or strengths such as self-control and grit, among other character strengths that focus on the qualities needed to achieve excellence (also see Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Seider, 2012). By and large, teachers did not report creating these lessons in a larger, formalized character or academic scope and sequence. Most teachers saw this lesson as a discrete opportunity to build students' understanding about a specific character strength. These findings place teacher practice in the foreground in order to develop stronger measures for determining the impact of school-based character education programs and understanding the role of teacher education in preparing teachers.

DEFINING CHARACTER AND CHARACTER STRENGTHS

In constructing a common definition of character, researchers need only to turn to the literature that examines the impact of character on life outcomes and earlier theoretical work. Contemporary thinking around character reflects a rather radical shift in its conceptualization. Among scholars, there is an emergent consensus, particularly in the education and psychology literatures, that character describes a set of attributes that motivate and guide individuals to act in an ethical, prosocial manner (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seider, 2012). Researchers view these attributes as relatively stable yet malleable in that a person's character adjusts to the social context and evolves with experience (Hunter, 2001; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seider, 2012). Academic discourse imagines character as a composite of specific *character strengths*, such as curiosity, bravery, self-control, love, and gratitude. Peterson and Seligman's (2004) classification system of 24 character strengths has helped to create a shared understanding of character strengths that spans various social and temporal contexts.

This definition has three key implications. First, this formulation conceives of character as inherently virtuous, which contrasts with earlier notions of character as an amoral

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description that includes the individual's functional and dysfunctional attributes. Second, as Seider (2012) points out, this definition suggests "that character is not simply possessing the motivation to do the right thing, but also developing the requisite skills and competencies" to do so (p. 21). According to Berkowitz (2011), the movement from motivation to volition requires the development of the cognitive capacity for moral reasoning to recognize the opportunity to act in an ethical manner as well as the emotional intelligence to act in a prosocial capacity. In theory, these cognitive and affective dispositions can independently lead to volition, but this research posits that habits, routines, and other patterned behaviors support volition. Seider's observation on the development of character underscores its malleability. Character develops through the enrichment of skills and competencies related to cognition, affect, and behavior (Seider, 2012).

Finally, if character is malleable, then institutions play an important role in the development of character (Hunter, 2001; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Chief among these institutions are schools (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2006; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999). Seider's study (2012) of character in three high performing charter schools along with Tough's (2012) journalistic analysis of character at Riverdale and KIPP academies are two recent and prominent case studies of school-based approaches to developing students' character. In contrast with programs like LionsQuest or Tribes, these school-based approaches are developed by school faculty, making them more "home grown" than externally produced programs. Studies of home-grown approaches to character offer insights into teachers' practices related to character development.

Schooling and Character Development

Recent research on character education suggests that a combination of concentrated and diffuse learning experiences positively impact students' character development. Seider (2012) finds that all the schools in his study crafted a clear vision of character education built around a set of character strengths. This vision was used to plan classes or lessons devoted to the selected character strengths. For instance, at one of schools, Boston Prep, students completed ethics classes from sixth through twelfth grade. The classes were scoped and sequenced in a manner to deepen students' understanding over time. The shared vision also guided teachers' ability to use "teachable moments" (e.g., classroom disagreements or world events) to reinforce the selected character strengths through the use of shared language, practices, and experiences. Although less detailed, the U.S. DOE report (2010) found that 82% of the programs as implemented by schools used direct instruction, suggesting the use of objective-driven learning experiences supports development. The CEP report also identified direct instruction as a common approach among programs (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). Together, this research suggests that teachers and program designers see the explicit and intentional creation of learning goals (i.e., objectives) as a component of character education.

Lickona and Davidson's (2005) study of 24 schools provides additional support for the combination of concentrated and diffuse learning experiences. With respect to diffuse experiences, the authors stress the importance of alignment between character education and rigorous academic expectations and disciplinary systems. The authors add that successful character education requires personal and collective responsibility among all school members and a professional learning community that supports teachers' continuous development.

Seider (2012), Lickona and Davidson (2005), and others (Nucci, Drill, Karson, & Browne, 2005) present at least three pieces of evidence to suggest that schools' home-grown approaches to character education are similar to common approaches to academic instruction. First, while schools provide a context that supports instructional practices, in each of these studies teacher-student interactions are

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the primary mechanism for developing character. Second, these are objective-driven interactions. Much like the development of shared understandings around grade level appropriate expository writing in third grade, the educators in these studies developed a shared vision of character development and created a plan to foster that growth. Third, these studies document teachers' intentional creation of unit and lesson plans that span the academic year or longer to teach character strengths. Additionally, the creation of a scope and sequence suggests an attention to mastery driven lessons. Collectively, this research suggests that research frameworks for examining academic instruction are applicable to the design, study, and implementation of character education.

Categorizing Character Strengths

The current conceptualization does present at least one challenge to measuring the impact of character education programs. Peterson and Seligman (2004) clearly state that character is not measurable but character strengths are. Yet, studies like the CEP and U.S. DOE-commissioned reports measure character through a wide range of independent and dependent variables. Several studies in positive psychology have made progress in measuring the impact individual character strengths have on various outcomes such as health (Giltay, Geleijnse, Zitman, Hoekstra, & Schouten, 2004), wealth (Moffitt et al., 2011), academic performance (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005), long-lasting relationships (Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal, & Duckworth, 2014), and job retention and performance (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014). And, other researchers have categorized character strengths to examine the impact of types of character strengths and character education programs (e.g., Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Seider, 2012). Much of this work has converged on a tripartite classification of character strengths. The first iteration of this categorization builds off the foundational work from Lickona and Davidson (2005) who defined two types of character: *performance* (the strengths needed to achieve excellence) and *moral* (the strengths necessary for ethical functioning). Shields (2011) expanded this work to include *civic* character (the strengths necessary for engaged and responsible citizenship). Seider (2012) integrated these types into a comprehensive and cohesive classification system.

Most recently, Duckworth and her colleagues constructed a classification of character strengths grounded in school-level practices and supported by empirical evidence (Duckworth et al., 2014). The authors used a character report card created by a network of charter schools to conduct a factor analysis on the indicators teachers used to assess students' character development. Their analysis led to the creation of a three-factor structure for character that distinguishes between achievement, social, and intellectual character (Duckworth et al., 2014).

Duckworth and her colleagues' typology is similar to Seider's classification, but there is one important difference. *Achievement character* bears a strong resemblance to Seider's theoretically grounded summary of performance strengths. Like Seider, Duckworth and her colleagues use this category to capture information on students' commitment to completing tasks despite obstacles or competing interests, which reflects character strengths such as grit and self-control. *Social character* captures information on students' relationships with others and includes optimism and gratitude. Social character is similar to Seider's (2012) definition of moral character, which he describes as "best conceptualized as a relational orientation" (p. 32), but the representative strengths he identifies are integrity, justice, and respect. The biggest difference emerges with *intellectual character* that, according to Duckworth and her colleagues, captures information on students' willingness to engage in learning and includes character strengths such as curiosity and creativity. In contrast, the third component in Seider's classification, which draws from Shields' research,

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is civic character. The author describes civic character as the individual's relationship with communities and includes character strengths such as citizenship. Seider and the Duckworth-led classifications are both a departure from Peterson and Seligman's (2004) classification system, which organizes 24 character strengths into six virtues.

Why is classification important? Berkowitz and Puka (2009) argue that while character is an inherent good, specific character strengths are not inherently good. An individual, for example, who lacks a moral orientation may apply a character strength like innovation without considering the ethical implications. The differences in grouping may reflect the existing consensus in the literature that character strengths are context-dependent, meaning individuals display character strengths as appropriate to the social setting (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Seider, Duckworth and her colleagues, and Peterson and Seligman created their classification systems using different types of evidence across varying contexts. Rather than dwell on differences, these authors' efforts to create classification systems illustrate the potential value added of grouping types of character strengths in order to better understand character development and character education.

From Theorization to Evaluation

The reports commissioned by CEP and U.S. DOE highlight the gulf between the study of character and the evaluation of character education programs. Far from failing to engage the existing literature, these reports selected methodologies appropriate to the programs under study. In doing so, the authors of these multiprogram reports first tackled the challenge of making sense of a diversity of programs—like Character Counts and Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers in the CEP report to Love in a Big World and Second Step in the U.S. DOE report—with differing goals, terminology, approaches, and required resources.

To solve this problem, both evaluation studies developed methodologies that served their study's research interests. Berkowitz and Bier (2005), the lead researchers on the CEP report, sought to produce a review of the character education research that would help to identify generalizable guidelines for practitioners interested in implementing character education as well as determine directions of future research. In response to this goal, the researchers used a relatively inclusive selection model that included any K–12 "initiative" in which the development of students' character was an explicit goal or measurable outcome. The Social and Character Development Research Program, which executed the U.S. DOE report, was organized for the expressed purpose of conducting "rigorous evaluations of universal school-based programs designed to help schools foster positive behaviors" and reduce negative behaviors, among other outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 1). This narrower research goal led researchers to create more specific criteria for inclusion (e.g., theory of action, implementation led by school-based personnel, and implementation across all students).

The methodologically driven research interests of these two multiprogram evaluations resulted in differences in the definitions of character education, scope of the programs under review (33 in the CEP study versus seven in the U.S. DOE report), the type of programs evaluated (e.g., in-school versus after-school or targeted versus universal), and the duration of the treatment with the U.S. DOE report examining all programs for 3 years against a control group of schools not implementing character education and the CEP study varying based on the research designs of the reviewed studies. Given these methodological decisions, the contradiction in research conclusions is less puzzling.

Despite their differences, both of these evaluations examine teacher practice through the lens of program fidelity. Berkowitz and Bier (2005) draw attention to this in their finding that the studies they reviewed did not pro-

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vide a thorough discussion of teacher practices. They also found few studies that examined home-grown approaches to character education, which would offer insight on teacher practice independent of schoolwide approaches. Teachers are often the mechanisms for change in school-based programs, so it is critical that researchers have a better understanding of teacher practice.

STUDY PURPOSE

This article takes a first step in studying the role of teachers in character education by developing an understanding of teacher practice grounded in character and positive psychology literature. This article also advances a teacher-centered understanding of instructional practices related to character education that is based on empirical studies of home-grown approaches to developing character in schools. Lastly, in an effort to make sense of teachers' interests in any number of character strengths, the article uses Duckworth et al.'s (2014) classification system.

The study asks three questions: (1) What type of character strengths do teachers select to teach? (2) How do teachers understand the importance of character instruction? and (3) What kind of learning experiences do teachers create related to character? The teachers in this study attended the same teacher education program, so the study also explores the role teacher education plays in developing teachers' understanding of character education.

DATA SOURCES AND METHODS

The study focuses exclusively on an assessment that required teachers to create at least one concentrated learning experience related to character education. While the existing research concludes that both concentrated and diffuse experiences are important, scholars agree that these concentrated experiences provide the foundation for diffuse learning experiences. With this in mind, the study examines lesson plans with at least one character-related objective created by 165 K–8 in-service teachers who were enrolled in the same course as part of their advanced degree program in teaching. Of the teachers enrolled in this course, approximately 59% of the teachers were enrolled in the elementary track with the remainder enrolled in the middle school track. Table 1 provides an overview of the general demographics of the teachers in the course.

In this course, teachers were required to submit a lesson plan, using a template provided by the program, with at least one character-related objective. The template required teachers to plan an approach for teaching a particular character strength that includes an

TABLE 1
Demographic Teacher Data for Sample

Variable	*M*
Ethnicity	
Percent White	65.63%
Percent African-American	15.63%
Percent Latino/Hispanic	6.25%
Percent Asian	6.25%
Percent Other	6.25%
Gender	
Percent Male	25.00%
Percent Female	75.00%

N = 165.

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opening, introduction to new material, practice, and closing. Teachers also submitted a reflection in which they discussed why they selected their particular character strengths, a discussion the strengths and weaknesses of the lesson plan and its delivery, and evidence of students' objective mastery.

Since teachers were in-service, the study also examines how teachers apply knowledge from the teacher education setting to the classroom, which Nucci and his colleagues (2005) identified as a research need. The program in which teachers were enrolled reflects some of the theorized and empirically based recommendations for developing teachers' knowledge of character and strategies for developing character strengths. The program offers concentrated and diffuse opportunities to develop teacher knowledge of character and character education, which the remainder of this section details.

Description of the Teacher Education Program

At the time the data were collected in academic year 2012–13, the program's coursework involved exposure to the literature on positive psychology, including scholarship from McCullough (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), Moffitt (Moffitt et al., 2011), and Peterson and Seligman (2004), among others. This literature defines character and character strengths, reviews research exploring the potential association between character strengths and life outcomes, and presents best practices for building specific character strengths. The program's earliest exposure to character focuses on Dweck's (2010) research on the growth mindset, a disposition identified by CEP (2008) as one of 10 ways schools can develop the character strengths that support achievement.

Teachers also explored issues related to morality (e.g., equity, empathy, perspective taking) as topics integrated through the program coursework. As an example, the faculty integrated questions of morality in a classroom culture course. Similarly, considerations related to child development were also integrated into the coursework. Nucci and his colleagues (2005) and Benninga et al. (2006) recommend these particular domains as key in teacher education as it relates to character.

The program's learning environment also supported teachers' knowledge of character and its instruction, reflecting attributes identified by Benninga et al. (2006), CEP (2008), and Lickona and Davidson (2005). For instance, earlier coursework discussed mastery learning (Bloom, 1981) and the use of rubric-based feedback to support mastery both of which CEP (2008) identified as strong practices for fostering a growth mindset. In a number of courses, teachers received formative and summative rubric-based feedback from faculty who model the use of rubrics. Lastly, teachers completed a course in which they discussed the importance of character in education, reflected on their personal character strengths, and identified the character strengths that would most benefit their students. Teachers were asked to use evidence (e.g., survey data or observations) as the basis for individual and student reflections. The aim in this course was to foster an asset orientation to character development rather than a deficit orientation.

The data reported in this article come from a course identified for the purposes of this study as Character Education 202 (CE-202), which follows the aforementioned coursework and builds on these earlier experiences. In CE-202, teachers explored additional readings from positive and social psychology that theorized or examined empirical evidence of specific strategies. Table 2 provides a sampling of the strategies teachers reviewed. The course coupled specific examples of strategies with more abstract approaches such as creating dual-purpose lesson plans that meaningfully integrate the study of character with academic goals. In doing so, the CE-202 course falls into the category of approaches that Williams and Schaps (1999) describe as process oriented approaches as opposed to those that are theoretical.

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TABLE 2
Sample Strategies Used to Teach Character Strengths

Targeted Character Strengths	*Strategy Description*	*Study Citation*
Gratitude	Ask students to write a letter of thanks to a person.	• Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson (2005)
Gratitude, optimism, social intelligence	Ask students to reflect on their day and list 3-5 things that went well and explain why they went well. This activity is commonly known as "Three Good Things" or "Count Your Blessings."	• Froh, Sefick, & Emmons (2008) • Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson (2005)
Optimism	Ask students to write about something they value (e.g., a relationship) and why.	• Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master (2006)
Optimism	Present and discuss with students age-appropriate readings about growth mindset.	• Wilson, Damiani, & Shelton (2002) • Wilson & Linville (1985) • Aronson, Fried, & Good (2002)
Self-control	Ask students to work with a partner to create a list of situations for which they anticipate needing to demonstrate self-control. Next, discuss actions that would help them demonstrate self-control in those situations.	• Proctor & Fox Eades (2011)
Self-control	Mental contrasting and implementation intentions require students to imagine how it would feel to attain some goal along with the obstacles that exist in achieving this goal. Finally, students create "implementation intentions," or "if/then" statements that will help students overcome the obstacle.	• Oettingen & Gollwitzer (2010)

CE-202 was focused on character instruction, specifically the application of previously learned principles and practices to plan and deliver lessons related to character. To reach this goal, teachers watched and discussed videos of character education and participated in activities in which faculty members modeled character instruction. For example, some instructors modified Mischel's (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriquez, 1989) marshmallow experiment and replaced the dessert with teachers' cell phones as an opportunity to discuss the skills needed to display self-control. Next, teachers used a lesson plan template provided by the program to draft a character-based lesson. The lesson plan template, reflecting components similar to those reported in home-grown approaches to character education, included an opening, introduction to new material, practice opportunities, and closing. Teachers shared their draft lesson plans with faculty members and peers who provided rubric-based formative feedback. Teachers used this feedback to revise their lessons and create a final lesson plan, which they taught. After teaching the lesson, teachers wrote a reflection on the design and delivery of the lesson plan. Teachers were welcome to use evidence of student learning as a way to evaluate their instructional planning and delivery but this was not required.

Data Analysis

We received 165 deidentified lesson plans from the teacher education program. Although

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deidentified, these lessons plans were accompanied by information on the teacher's race and ethnicity, gender, grade level, and subject(s) taught. Information regarding the teacher's race and ethnicity and gender were matched using the generated number of the lesson plan with a roster of demographic data. Nine of the received lesson plans were missing or contained incomplete information and were removed from the analysis. We also received course materials, including a course description, readings, handouts, and the lesson plan template. These materials along with interviews with faculty members who served as key informants shaped the authors' understanding of the learning experiences related to character that the program provided.

We used qualitative coding software to analyze the lesson plans, reflections, and any supporting documentation. To code the lesson plans, we used qualitative programs based on our operating systems and software availability. The first author used Atlas.ti. The second author used HyperResearch. We produced Excel-based reports and compared our findings in this format. The primary codes listed in Table 3 were based on the sections of the lesson plan template. The subcodes also listed in Table 3 were developed inductively by the first author and later confirmed and refined in the coding process by the second author.

The primary codes and subcodes align to the study's research questions. The first part of the coding framework addressed the first research question. Since teachers were free to select any character strength as the focus of their objective, we categorized these character strengths into types. To do so, we used the typology advanced by Duckworth and her colleagues. The Duckworth-led classification system is based on empirical data collected within a school setting. Since the study is explicitly interested in teachers' understanding of character strengths, this typology was most appropriate for categorizing the character strengths that teachers selected. We used this scale to code the character strengths teachers selected, which is depicted in Table 3. The second and third parts of the coding framework align to the second and third research questions, respectively.

Each researcher independently coded the lesson plans. We then met to discuss questions that emerged in applying the primary codes and subcodes and discussed trends. The second author generated memos on patterns, trends, and within code and subcode observations, which, along with the codes, provide evidence of the teacher education program's impact. Once we completed the coding, we compared our application of the codes and resolved discrepancies. Table 3 lists the code frequencies.

There were only minor discrepancies across the majority of codes, with the exception of the value code, which captured information on how teachers communicated the importance of character strengths with their students. We discovered that teachers' statements on the value of a specific character strength appeared throughout the assignment. Some teachers explained the value in the lesson plan content (e.g., the introduction to new material or guided practice). Others discussed the value in their reflections. The discussion in the reflection typically used more research-based language to explain the value of the character strength with some explanations reading as post hoc analysis. Of course, there were some teachers who explained the value of the character strength throughout all sections of the assignment. As such, this code did not lend itself as well to a frequency analysis as the other codes.

RESULTS

Our results offer insight into teachers' approaches to character education by examining the instructional practices teachers planned to use to teach character strengths. To begin, we explored the types of character strengths teachers chose to focus on and discovered that the majority of teachers selected achievement-oriented strengths. In fact, most teachers

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TABLE 3
Framework for Analyzing Character Lesson Plans

Research Question 1: Categorization of Character Strength

Primary Code	*Description*	*Subcode(s) & Frequency*
Character strength	The character strength teachers focused on during their instruction: • Social character—captures information on students' relationships with others (e.g., optimism, gratitude) • Intellectual character—captures information on students' willingness to engage in learning (e.g., curiosity and creativity • Achievement character—captures information on students' commitment to outcomes (e.g., grit, self-control)	1—social character (33%) 2—intellectual character (10%) 3—achievement character (57%)

Research Question 2: Importance of Character Strength

Code	*Description*	*Subcode(s) & Frequency*
Value	How the value of the character strength was described to students: • Future—focused on some future outcome (e.g., having grit will help you do well in college) • Immediate—focused on immediate outcome (e.g., having gratitude will help you build better relationships with your friends and family)	1—Future 2—Immediate We discovered that most teachers used a combination of strategies for communicating about the value of character with their students. As such, we did not code this topic using a frequency analysis.
Expectancy	• How the teacher defines the strength and whether they include key steps or strategies for students to take to demonstrate the strength (e.g., teacher clearly defines gratitude and shares with students the key facets of gratitude and how it can be exhibited)	1—definition is provided (81%) 2—definition is provided and key steps/ strategies for how to demonstrate trait are discussed (19%)

Research Question 3: Type of Learning Experience

Primary Code	*Description*	*Subcode(s) & Frequency*
Nature	Any information on how the character strength was taught (e.g., as a discrete lesson, as part of an ongoing curriculum)	1—discrete lesson (60%) 2—ongoing (40%)
Focus	Whether the character strength is integrated with academic instruction	1—dual purpose lesson (40%) 2—character-only instruction (60%)
Modeling type	Whether the modeling is led by the student or the teacher	1—student led (13%) 2 – teacher led (68%) 3—both student and teacher led (19%)
Modeling focus	Whether the modeling was focused on some external source (e.g., a famous figure) or something more internal/ relevant for the students (e.g., themselves, a close friend)	1—global focus, e.g., a character (15%) 2—specific focus, e.g., your life (72%) 3—both global and specific (13%)
Practice type	Whether the practice is focused on building understanding versus applied practice	1—building understanding (15%) 2—applied practice (72%) 3—both (13%)
Practice focus	Whether the practice was focused on some external source (e.g., a famous figure) or something more internal/ relevant for the students (e.g., themselves, a close friend)	1—global focus, e.g., a character (13%) 2—specific focus, e.g., your life (74%) 3—both (13%)

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directly connected the selected character strength with academic outcomes and reported that character was necessary for helping students attain success in their academic pursuits. The majority of teachers followed a mastery learning approach with clearly articulated objectives and opportunities for practice. Indeed, as was the case in prior research (Seider, 2012), we discovered that teachers implemented character education in much the same way they would academic content. However, the majority of lesson plans focused on building lower levels of understanding (e.g., knowledge or comprehension) of character strengths, with only a few teachers planning lessons in which students practiced applying a character strength. Together, these findings demonstrate the connections teachers made between character and academic outcomes as well as the influential role teacher education played in shaping teachers' approach to character education. Importantly, we did not find any variation in our results across teacher demographics (e.g., by gender, race, age) or by teacher assignment (e.g., grade level, subject area) so all results are reported at an aggregate level below.

Research Questions 1 and 2: Type and Importance of Character Strengths

The first part of the coding analysis revealed that most teachers planned character instruction focused on achievement strengths (e.g., grit, self-control). Indeed, more than 50% of the teachers in our sample chose to teach achievement character strengths (57%) compared to 33% social character strengths (e.g., gratitude) and 10% intellectual character strengths (e.g., curiosity). This is perhaps not surprising since the majority of course materials focused on character strengths to achieve some performance outcome. The second part of the analysis demonstrated the strong connection that teachers drew between character and students' academic outcomes. The excerpt below captures one teacher's straightforward calculation of the relationship between her selected character strength, grit, and student performance on the STEP assessment, an early elementary literacy assessment:

- Students need grit to reach EOY [end of year] reading goals: Step 9 or above
- Students need to possess grit to do well in college
- Working on grit will help us make EOY reading goals and our big goals of graduating college in 2027 (Elementary teacher, African American female)

The teacher connects grit to the immediate academic goal of improved reading but also long term academic goals of college completion.

To further persuade students of the importance of the selected character strength, teachers relied on personal meaning and experiences as well as reflections on the current or previous years as a classroom teacher. The teacher below planned to open his lesson by leveraging his personal experiences to illustrate the importance of his selected character strength, zest.

Lesson Introduction:

- Today I want to tell you about a subject I didn't enjoy.
- When I was in first grade, I didn't enjoy fitness because I had a hard time dribbling and kicking the ball. Whenever it was time for fitness, I'd start to feel nervous. … It was hard to show zest.
- It's important to show zest, though. So I worked hard to find something I did enjoy about fitness, and I realized I love to run! …. When it was time to run, I …made sure to show zest. …. Slowly, I started to enjoy fitness! (Elementary teacher, White male)

Some teachers, such as the one below, stated the importance as a truism and buttressed the purpose with references to historical and contemporary figures.

> I will explain that grit is more important than any one subject because if you have strong grit it will help you do anything you want to do. It will help make your dreams come true. I will explain that all of my heroes and people that I admire, like Cesar Chavez, have shown a lot of grit throughout their

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> lives and that's been a big part of their success. (Elementary teacher, White male)

While other teachers cited research findings that linked the selected character strengths with improved life outcomes, though there was limited evidence to suggest that teachers invited students to read the research themselves. Rarely did teachers' plans delve into the kind of specific conversation that Lickona and Davidson (2005) and Seider (2012) report observing in the schools they studied with classes or instructional periods devoted to the development of specific character strengths. Finally, all of the excerpts in this section demonstrate that teachers connected the importance of character strengths with individual benefits—academic success, personal fulfillment, achieving individual dreams—as opposed to or in addition to group benefits.

Research Question 3: Teachers' Learning Experiences for Character Education

The third part of our analysis addressed the third research question. Through the coding framework we looked for trends in how teachers integrated character education in their classrooms. In particular, we wanted to know if the character-based lesson was discrete or part of an ongoing curriculum and whether character was taught alongside academic objectives. Next, we wanted to understand lesson plan structure and content. We looked closely at the type of activities teachers designed to teach their selected character strength.

Integration of Character Education

Although the course only required teachers to provide evidence of one lesson, the faculty hoped that this lesson would provide the basis for continued concentrated or diffuse learning experiences related to character education. However, the third part of our analysis revealed that the majority of teachers (60%) taught character as a concentrated and discrete lesson, with just less than half clearly indicating that the lesson was part of an ongoing scope and sequence. As demonstrated in Table 4, this finding was consistent across types of character strengths. It is important to note, however, that the lesson plan template, including reflection, did not explicitly ask teachers to discuss how the particular lesson plan fit within ongoing instruction. As a result, it is possible that teachers engaged in more diffuse character development outside of the particular lesson itself. When it was present, ongoing development included revisiting a character strength as part of a regular classroom community meeting or teaching character as a unit that lasted over the course of multiple lessons. Nonetheless, teachers' decision to include or exclude a discussion of ongoing concentrated and diffuse learning experiences in their lesson plans provides some insights on teachers' intentionality related to character education planning.

TABLE 4
Focus Character Strengths and Description of Instruction

	Total (N=165)	*Achievement (N=94)*	*Social (N=55)*	*Intellectual (N=16)*
Concentrated	60%	59%	61%	67%
Diffuse	40%	41%	39%	33%
Dual purpose	40%	38%	43%	40%
Character only	60%	62%	60%	60%

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One way to incorporate character education without sacrificing instructional time devoted to academic outcomes is to offer dual-purpose lessons. Lickona and Davidson (2005) advocate for the integration of character education with traditional academic content as an effective strategy for developing character. Of the teachers in this study, 40% created dual-purpose lesson plans, in other words lessons with character and academic objectives. The teachers' learning experiences highlighted opportunities to develop students' curiosity, for example, to support science objectives or any host of character strengths to support English language arts objectives related to, for example, character or novel studies. That a smaller proportion of teachers created dual-purpose lessons, despite coursework focused on this topic, suggests limitations of the impact of teacher education. Lastly, we expected to find trends within teachers' subject areas and the selected character strengths but no significant trends were discernable.

Character Lesson Plan Structure and Content

Teachers submitted lesson plans aligned to a common structure required by CE-202. We observed a common structure to teacher' lesson plans. Lesson plans opened with teachers defining and explaining the importance of the character strength. After the opening, the majority of lessons aimed to build understanding, meaning students had the chance to practice defining the character strength but did not have the opportunity to practice demonstrating the strength. In these lessons, teachers typically shared examples of how they demonstrated a specific strength before asking students to do the same or to identify a time when they could have displayed the strength. This type of reflective practice was structured as follows and applied frequently across all types of character strengths: First, students write a personal essay or discuss with their classmates a time that they demonstrated a particular strength and describe the effect it had on their life, others around them, or a particular situation. Second, students brainstormed opportunities to apply the strength in future situations.

A few of the lesson plans focused on applied practice. Though applied practice was less common, it was more meaningful in that it gave students an opportunity to practice the skill and receive feedback during the course of the lesson. The achievement character strengths (e.g., grit, self-control) appear to lend themselves more to applied practice. An example of applied practice is provided:

> I want to teach a lesson where children felt a physical manifestation of discomfort as related to grit. In my lesson, the children are doing the "plank"—an uncomfortable position where they are supporting themselves with their arms and stomach muscles. If children can persevere and show grit at a time they were physically uncomfortable, my hope is that they would translate that sensation toward testing situations. (Elementary teacher, White female)

The teacher in the above excerpt creates a learning experience that gives students the opportunity to practice the affective skill needed to demonstrate grit. Again, lesson plans with applied practice were less common. Despite the variation in the types of practice teachers' designed, the majority of teachers followed a mastery driven approach by creating lesson plans that supported the development of a particular strength with direct instruction, modeling, and practice.

The majority of teachers used generic language to describe character strengths in the opening and introduction to new material portions of the lesson (e.g., grit means working hard, gratitude means being nice). Only 19% of teachers explicitly named strategies—procedures, techniques, and other specific actions—for students to use in order to display character strengths. These more generic discussions of character strengths are likely due to the fact that CE-202 prompted teachers to create age-appropriate definitions of particular character strengths. But, given that CE-202 included interventions like MCII (see Table 2),

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teachers' limited focus on teaching specific strategies is less clear. Several teachers, such as the one below, reflected on the fact that they could have done more to make strategies explicit.

> If I were to go back, I would have taken the time during the introduction to talk through what kinds of things someone who is showing grit might say or do to … (Elementary teacher, White female)

Teachers that did plan lessons with applied practice, such as the teacher below, typically taught specific strategies for developing the character strength.

> Self-control affects different domains—the academic and the personal. We learned five specific cognitive strategies they could use to help them self-regulate and move from the hot system to the cool system. The strategies are: telling yourself "I think I can," learning to stop and think, bouncing back, taking a brain breath, or thinking "stretch yourself." Each of these strategies was explicitly taught and modeled, and tied to a visual anchor. "I think I can" and "stretch yourself" are more tied to academic self-regulation and persisting at a difficult task, while taking a brain breath, bouncing back, and learning to stop and think more tied to emotional and behavioral regulation. (Elementary teacher, Latino female)

This teacher not only selected strategies to help students demonstrate self-control but also distinguished between skills that support cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills needed to do so. This level of intentionality was rare among the plans in our sample but reflects the level of detail possible in planning character lessons.

The Influence of Teacher Education on Teachers' Lessons Plans

Regardless of whether teachers created lesson plans with opportunities to build understanding or for applied practice, teachers' learning experiences in CE-202 as well as other coursework informed their selection of learning activities. The learning activities in teachers' lesson plans included research-supported interventions (refer to Table 2 for examples) and strategies that faculty modeled, (e.g., developing a shared understanding of character strengths through discussion and using books, video, and other forms of media). Teachers typically included more than one course-based intervention or strategy in designing learning activities. Below, the excerpt from a science teacher's lesson plan aimed at developing students' social intelligence serves as an example. In the lesson plan, the teacher sets out to develop both students' understanding and application of social intelligence with collective brainstorming activity, which resembles the strategy discussed by Proctor and Fox Eades (2011), and a self-assessment, an activity teachers completed in the prerequisite course to CE-202.

> [Introduction] I will start the day's lesson with the general definition of social intelligence, which, as defined by Peterson (2006), is the ability to "[be] aware of the motive and feelings of other people and the self; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations …"
>
> [Modeling] I will refer to our [class] chart again and reinforce the communication skills I will be looking for during the day's discussion. The simple t-chart [sic] models good and bad ways to communicate with others. I also asked [sic] scholars to give examples of how they can show social intelligence…
>
> [Practice] Scholars will have the opportunity to practice this character strength as often as we have group assignments.… After today's lesson, I will have scholars reflect on their ability to show social intelligence based on the character report card they will also complete. (Middle school teacher, African American female)

Teachers' plans were influenced by research on the relationship between character strengths and outcomes, as well as specific learning experiences designed to build teachers' professional knowledge. This is evident in the above lesson plan on social intelligence in which the teacher draws from the research literature to define social intelligence. Several teachers used Walter Mischel's marshmallow experiment (Mischel et al., 1989), a study designed to investigate the relationship between

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self-control and achievement outcomes, as the basis of activities designed to offer practice or identify strategies students can use to demonstrate the selected character strength.

The learning activities teachers created involved applying interventions and strategies in ways that were outside the scope of the intervention design or faculty modeling. Again, the above lesson plan on social intelligence illustrates this kind of use. Proctor and Fox Eades (2011) suggested this strategy as a way to develop self-control. The teacher, however, repurposed this activity to build social intelligence. Perhaps not surprisingly, teachers' use of interventions outside their intended scope was most common for character strengths that had a limited body of research or few recommended strategies from CE-202 readings and other learning experiences. Conversely, teachers who selected character strengths with interventions or strategies discussed in CE-202 tended to incorporate those interventions and strategies in their lesson plans.

DISCUSSION

This article set out to advance our understanding of character education in American schools by more closely examining teacher practice. Unlike other studies or multiprogram reports, the study uses a definition of character based in the literature from positive psychology. The research design also surveys the literature on character education and schooling to identify teacher practices related to character development. Finally, rather than trying to make sense of specific types of character strengths, the study draws from the work of Duckworth and her colleagues (2014) to examine types of character strengths.

We found that a majority of teachers selected achievement strengths and other character strengths that lead to excellence. Conversely, a minority (10%) selected strengths of intelligence. We did not find significant differences in the selection of these character strengths based on grade band or subjects taught. Curiously, although half of the teachers in the study selected achievement strengths, most teachers planned lessons with practice opportunities designed to build understanding—not for applied practice. This suggests there is a gap between teachers' understanding of character strengths and how to support the development of those strengths. Alternatively, this gap may reflect teachers' sense of efficacy to create lessons that include opportunities to apply specific character strengths. In some cases, teachers did explain that the lesson they submitted was the first in a sequence so they wanted to build conceptual knowledge before application, yet most teachers submitted plans for a single concentrated lesson.

There are three plausible explanations for teachers' preference for achievement strengths. First, this may be a reflection of the impact of the teacher education program on teachers. The program presented teachers with research that demonstrates the relationship between achievement strengths and life outcomes. Yet, the inclusion of this research is an artifact of the research field itself with academics pursuing research agendas tied to achievement strengths and less to social or intellectual strengths. A second plausible reason for teachers' interest in achievement strengths lies in current context of American schooling. Since the 1980s, student and teacher achievement has been a target of reform with testing gates for students' promotion and value added measures to evaluate teachers. Teachers may see achievement strengths as one more tool to improve student learning outcomes. Lastly, the decision may be a reflection of teachers' school contexts. While the lesson plan template did not ask teachers to report on the existence of character education in their schools, many teachers justified the selection of a specific strength as aligning to or extending their school's current program. More research is needed to understand the relationship between teachers' school-based character education programs and the selection

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of the character strengths they explicitly develop.

While no research suggests that one type of strength is preferable or more valuable than another, the focus on achievement strengths does have implications for students' character development. Davis (2003) is careful to point out that a focus on performance, which most closely aligns with achievement strengths in Duckworth's categorization, emphasizes developing habits. But, he warns, habit formation cannot occur without the codevelopment of meaning. Habit without meaning, Davis (2003) argues, goes against the larger idea of character as a "general tendency to deliberate in a certain way … with deliberation ending in action" (p. 44). Davis concludes that a focus on performance as mere habits, rituals, and requirements threatens the individual's character development.

The study also aimed to understand teacher practice outside fidelity to a school-based program. The goal of this line of inquiry was to develop a more universal approach to examining teachers' instructional practices related to character that better supports multiprogrammatic reviews. First, we find that the majority of teachers (60%) designed a single character lesson despite instruction in the program that highlighted the benefits of ongoing learning experiences. Again, a number of reasons may explain this outcome from time and interest in character education to school context and the assessment parameters for CE-202, which we examine in the limitations section. At the same time, according to some research, teachers' selection of interventions such as writing about values and reading about growth mindset can yield positive outcomes with limited time investment (see Table 2), meaning a single lesson can add value.

The analysis of teachers' plans reveals that teachers rely on their personal experiences to support students' understanding of character strengths. As reported, teachers in this study did not delve into in-depth, ongoing conversations about the value of specific character strengths. In general, we found that teachers created concentrated learning experiences focused on building students' understanding related to defining a specific character strength with less attention on the value of the strength. This strays from the emergent best practices from the studies of home-grown approaches, which suggest that a mix of concentrated and diffuse forms of character education better positions students to develop more than just habits but a set of processes for deliberation and action.

This study also offers insight into the ways teacher educators shape teachers' practices, especially as it relates to character. As described, the coursework and learning experiences focused on creating practice opportunities to build understanding and apply a selected character strengths, with a faculty preference for the latter. Yet, teachers largely created lessons focused on building understanding. As a result, teachers designed learning experiences that helped students identify when someone displays a particular character strength or identify opportunities to display a strength, but fewer teachers created practice opportunities for students to combine the cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills needed to display a strength. In contrast, teachers seemed to rely more heavily on the interventions and strategies presented in CE-202 to select and design learning activities. In the instances in which teachers had access to research-based interventions and strategies modeled by faculty, teachers incorporated these activities. Teachers even relied on these featured interventions and strategies to develop character strengths for which the research base is still emerging or were not featured in the course.

We also found that teachers narrowly defined achievement strengths in relation to success in school and career. Moreover, teachers presented a linear relationship between the two. This emphasis on behavior and behavioral outcomes suggests teachers' limited understanding of the cognitive and affective dimensions of character strengths. It also suggests that teachers may not fully appreciate the

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inherent virtue of character strengths that an increasing number of academics describe. The dominant formulation embedded in teachers' achievement lessons plans is if you show an achievement strength you will achieve your goals. This logical inference obscures the sheer good of the strength and could be misleading to students.

Given that teachers created primarily concentrated and achievement-focused lessons and that we observed a disconnect between teachers' selection of achievement strengths and their plans to develop that strength, there is an opportunity for schools of education and other teacher preparation programs to develop more robust character education training for teachers. Teacher education programs need to do a better job of building teachers' conceptual knowledge of character and investing teachers in developing character, especially in K–12 schools that have not adopted a whole-school approach. This recommendation fits within the National Commission on Character Education's call for teacher educators to better define character education and consider how to make it a more intentional part of their overall programmatic approach (Williams & Schaps, 1999).

LIMITATIONS

This study has three key limitations. First, the study stems from the design of the final assignment for CE-202, which required teachers to use a lesson plan format modeled on Hunter's (Hunter & Hunter, 2004) seven principles of teaching. While the coursework included readings and other learning experiences related to concentrated and diffuse approaches to character education, the course focused on teachers' ability to effectively plan and deliver instruction aligned to character objectives. This requirement helped the faculty gather more trustworthy evidence of teachers' ability to meet the goals of CE-202. It also placed limitations on teachers' design of learning experiences. Since this study, however, the faculty has moved away from a required lesson plan format and revised the assignment so that teachers present a planned learning experience related to character education. This revision creates space for teachers to employ a more diverse set of pedagogical methods such as problem-based learning, Socratic seminar, or labs.

Second, the study was not designed to probe teachers' rationale for the duration of character education, but the fact that 60% of teachers created concentrated learning plans suggests a pattern that is worth investigating in future research. Additionally, while this study provides insight into how teachers conceptualize character instruction, it does not measure the impact of these instructional practices on student outcomes. As noted above, there is an emerging body of research demonstrating the impact of individual character strengths in a variety of fields. However, we still have limited understanding of how specific practices translate to changes in outcomes. Future research should use the framework we developed in this study to further codify teachers' instructional approaches to character education and link those various approaches to student outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS

Despite an increased focus on the relationship between character and life outcomes, research on the efficacy of programs designed to develop character reveals mixed results. While prior research has analyzed the fidelity of implementation, the literature on teacher practice is limited. Further, there is little research on the role of teacher education programs in shaping teachers' approaches to character instruction. This study aimed to fill these gaps in the literature by strengthening our understanding of how teachers planned for and executed character instruction in their classrooms. In turn, our results have implications for both researchers and practitioners.

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This study corroborated prior research demonstrating that teachers often implement character education in a manner similar to academic instruction. However, it built upon these results by developing a two-part coding framework that can be used to analyze teachers' specific instructional decisions around the choice of character strengths and the structure of character lesson plans. This type of framework should be employed in future evaluation studies to systematically evaluate the way that teachers approach character instruction. Further, researchers should use the literature to more clearly categorize types of character strengths so that results can be easily compared across studies.

This study also highlights avenues of needed research. Teachers' use of interventions and strategies from CE-202 suggests that character education and positive psychology is a space where teachers are eager to incorporate research-based practices. But, in many instances, teachers did not have access to the research. In some cases, teachers' limited access to evidence-based interventions and strategies may be due to the limited amount of research on character strengths like curiosity, zest, and creativity. In other cases, it may point to an area of improvement for the program and teacher education more broadly to stress the professional importance of independently engaging in the research literature.

For practitioners, this study developed insight into the role of teacher education in shaping teachers' knowledge of character and character education. Our results suggest that programs can use instructional approaches common to academic instruction as a foundation for developing teacher practice related to character education. However, it will be necessary to develop methods for supporting teachers' development of ongoing and diffuse learning experiences related to character. Finally, teacher educators must be attentive to develop teachers' intellectual understandings of character as requiring cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills, as a balance between types of character, and as an inherent good not only as a tool for academic success. Teacher educators should consider revising program outcomes to meet these needs, as well as looking for teachers' reinforcement of character strengths during observations to increase accountability for ongoing and diffuse learning experience. Given the limited research on the role of teacher education programs, it is essential that as new programs are developed, they are accompanied by rigorous quantitative and qualitative research to assess the impact they have on teachers' instruction and ultimately, students' character-related outcomes along with others.

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