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USING THE FOUR AGREEMENTS TO REDUCE STUDENT STRESS
IN A ZERO TOLERANCE SCHOOL

by
William Suarez

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Science in Teaching Degree
of
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at
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Approved by

Advisor

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ABSTRACT

William Suarez

USING THE FOUR AGREEMENTS TO REDUCE STUDENT STRESS IN A ZERO TOLERANCE SCHOOL

2008/09

Dr. Yvonne E. González Rodríguez
Master of Science in Teaching

As the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 increased academic pressure on students, the Guns Free Schools Act of 1994 required school districts to implement zero tolerance discipline policies that called for expulsion of students who bring weapons to school or commit drug offenses on school property. The zero tolerance policy forced students to deal with punishments and requirements that many educators feel are unevenly meted out (National Association of School Psychologists, 2008). This resulted is a stressful climate for students.

The Four Agreements are part of an esoteric Toltec philosophy that emphasizes stress-free interpersonal interactions (Ruiz, 1997). By enabling students to use this philosophy as an intrinsic part of their school interactions, this qualitative action research study sought to improve the classroom behavior and enhance classroom interactions of a small sample of six students in a medium-sized New Jersey middle school, observing how the Four Agreements affected their behavior over the course of eleven weeks. Ultimately, inadequate data was gathered to make a decisive conclusion, due to suboptimal levels of student participation. Recommendations for future studies in this vein include using more time (ideally a full school year) to observe the effects of the Four Agreements on student behavior.

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I also owe my children a measurable note of thanks for their patience and understanding for the time I missed from their lives and the school and achievement events that I missed as I worked to finish my schooling. Most of all I would like to thank my wife Kim, the Queen of the Slipstream, who stood by me during difficult times and whose continued encouragement and support made this achievement possible.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The current school climate that emphasizes high achievement and safety as a result of the Guns Free Schools Act of 1994 and No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 has created a dilemma for middle school students as they make their way to high school. The No Child Left Behind Act passed by Congress in 2002 required schools to be accountable for student achievement. The Guns Free Schools Act of 1994 required school districts to implement zero tolerance discipline policies that called for expulsion of students who bring weapons to school or commit drug offenses on school property. These acts force students to deal with punishments and requirements that many educators feel are unevenly meted out (National Association of School Psychologists, 2008). These policies are used to remove difficult students from class and are seen as sending a clear message to students that certain behaviors are unacceptable in school (National Association of School Psychologists).

According the U.S. Department of Education, zero tolerance policies call for predetermined and severe punishment for specific offenses such as weapons violations, narcotic use and sale, and serious physical assault (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). President Clinton's Guns Free School Act (U.S Department of Education) mandated states to require a one year minimum suspension for students who bring a weapon to school. Severe punishments were to be meted out on the first instance. In an effort to appear fair to all offenders, zero tolerance policies have expanded to include nonviolent

infractions as well (Fries & Demitchell, 2007). Blanket judgments do not allow for consideration of factors such as context of infraction, student history, intent, or even allowing teachers to provide their input into offenses (Fries & Demitchell). According to the National Association of School Psychologists these policies were ineffective and contributed to a host of negative behaviors and consequences including increased drop-out rates (2008).

Many eighth graders who were interviewed understood the need for strict discipline policies but echoed the feelings of one of the research participants who felt that they (students) were “being punished without being able to defend themselves” (Vin, 2009). Zero tolerance also runs counter democratic principles that are taught as part of the social studies curriculum by denying students the constitutionally guaranteed right to due process. In 1986, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Epperson v. Arkansas* that “the vigilant protection of constitutional freedoms is nowhere more vital than in the community of American schools” (1968). Students expressed their confusion at how the school can violate the rights they know are supposed to be respected while imposing harsh discipline (Vin).

Zero discipline creates a paradox for students and educators alike. Students who feel they will be treated harshly are more likely to be repeat offenders if they have nothing to lose. According to the principal of the Waterburg Middle School (WMS), where this study was conducted, the district modified their policy in order to minimize the number of repeat offenders. In this school, students mitigating factors are considered for fifth and sixth grade for most referrals, with the exception of firearm and drug

offenses. Seventh and Eighth graders are judged by a more strict set of standards due to the feeling that they are more mature. The principal also acknowledged that most students were reluctant to lose extracurricular privileges by reoffending.

Character education programs have been enacted in many schools as a way to foster a sense of belonging in students and counteract a perceived decline in the quality of public education (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). Skaggs and Bodenhorn described good character education as “any deliberate approach by which school personnel...help children and youth become caring, principled and responsible” (84). Many character education programs attempt to foster a sense of community by focusing on the similarities between individuals thus forming a homogeneous community.

Character Education programs rely on each student giving up personal characteristics in order to bring cohesion to a larger group (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). The code of conduct that I instituted as part of my research depends on each person taking personal responsibility in the way they act toward themselves and toward others. I hoped that by introducing students to a conduct philosophy I could help them to self monitor their behavior and interactions before they can be misconstrued and involve administrators in minor misunderstandings.

Research Background

I feel strongly that zero tolerance policies trap well meaning students in a system that is designed to help schools deal with escalating school violence and drug problems. These policies have been extended to include minor offences that had previously been dealt with by teachers and guidance counselors and students were given the chance to

explain their actions. In many cases, as I had been told by my students, they feel that they are considered to be automatically guilty and that there is no due process in schools. Students felt powerless to change the way in which discipline is meted out, so I hoped that by introducing my students to the *Four Agreements* they could avoid misunderstandings that happen every day in their school life.

Before I met my classes I planned on introducing *The Four Agreements* as a class constitution and model of behavior. By joining in January, I was entering a class culture that had been established in the beginning of the school year. I felt that it would be easier for my eighth grade classes to adjust to my presence if they knew how I conducted myself personally thus we could keep transitional problems to a minimum. It became apparent to me that if students make this code of conduct an intrinsic element of their belief system, even in a small way, they could improve their interactions and avoid discipline referrals.

Significance of the Study

When the federal government mandated severe consequences for infractions in schools it left room for states to pass laws according to their own needs. According to Robbins (2005) this enabled teachers and administrators to widely interpret what offenses are covered by the law and left marginalized groups to feel overwhelmed by discipline policies that have been put into place without their input. According to the principal of the school where this research was conducted students faced with severe punishments were more likely to be repeat offenders.

Character Education programs were implemented for schools to fulfill their role of provider of moral education and to enable students to make good decisions on their own, and to build a sense of responsibility, community, understanding of and participation in societal affairs, and respect for others (Pearson, 2000).

I was motivated to enact this research when some of the most insightful and motivated students were given lengthy suspensions that stemmed from minor misunderstandings between themselves and other classmates. After talking with students in different classes, I believe that the discipline policy was being broadly interpreted by some school administrators. The outcome of this was the removal of students they saw as disruptive from the school population, and to set an example for other students. *The Four Agreements* are a self empowerment philosophy based on “ancient esoteric traditions” that are taught around the world (Ruiz, 1997). I felt that students could be successful in making elements of *The Four Agreements* an intrinsic part of their school interaction and avoid these misunderstandings and remain in the classroom.

Research Question

In order to accomplish the purpose of this study the following research question will be posed:

Can a character education program based on *The Four Agreements* impact tolerance among peers and reduce behavior referrals in a zero-tolerance middle school?

Integrated Action and Purpose

The purpose of this research is to determine if a personal empowerment philosophy is effective in reducing stress between peers in a suburban middle school over

a 10 week period using a small diverse group of Eighth grade students. Students were provided with background of the philosophy, an interpreted version of *The Four Agreements* appropriate for eighth grade students, and research was linked to social studies lessons pertaining to the Reform Era history.

My intention for this research project was to use *The Four Agreements* and myself as a model for students to mirror their behavior and by linking this philosophy to the social studies curriculum, I had hoped the students would begin to make these principles an intrinsic part of their own mode of behavior. The Reform Era unit in social studies illustrates the change in American society that allowed some people to care more about others in society and sought ways to improve society as a whole.

The belief that social studies and character education has been well established. There is an abundance of literature from news media, education groups, and social scientists that attempt to provide a definition of character education and the reasons for social studies teachers to provide this education. English researchers Revell and Arthur (2007) illustrated that Character Education and Citizen Education shared the goal of moral development and enabling students to become active in community and political life.

Assumptions and Limitations

When discussing the efficacy of this study it is necessary to assume that this study cannot be generalized to the entire diverse middle school population, with different backgrounds, life experiences, and motivations.

Additionally, it is assumed that middle school students have the maturity and willingness to understand an abstract personal empowerment philosophy like *The Four Agreements*. The researcher further assumes that students that are not in the study group will understand that participating students are using this philosophy and can avoid misunderstandings.

Research was further limited by the stressful atmosphere prior to students taking the mandatory New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) test. The NJ ASK is conducted to measure student progress toward passing the eleventh grade assessment (New Jersey Department of Education Office of Assessment, 2006). Students are constantly reminded of the importance of doing well on this assessment; poor performance will make them ineligible for certain classes in high school. Social Studies is not included in this assessment so this class was often not a priority for students making them reluctant to participate in my research.

The major limitation I faced with this study was my own inexperience in conducting research, my inexperience with implementing character education programs and my reluctance to delve into the backgrounds of students. Student privacy is held in high regard in this school district. Students were reluctant to volunteer information when asked and I did not feel comfortable pressuring them for detailed information on their lives outside of school. My lack of training in adolescent psychology further limited my ability to react to student response to this philosophy, modify lesson plans and instruction.

Definitions

Character Education. According to the Center for Character Education, character education is defined as "the deliberate effort by schools, families, and communities to help young people understand, care about, and act upon core ethical values" (Lickona, 1996).

Action Research. School and classroom-based studies initiated and conducted by teachers and other school staff. Action research involves teachers, aides, principals, and other school staff as researchers who systematically reflect on their teaching or other work and collect data that will answer their questions (Burns, 2007).

The Four Agreements. "[A] powerful code of conduct that can rapidly transform our lives to a new experience of freedom and happiness" (Ruiz, 1997).

Discipline. A rule or system of rules governing conduct or activity.

Extrinsic. Originating outside a part and acting upon the part as a whole.

Intrinsic. Belonging to the essential nature or constitution of a thing.

Zero Tolerance. The policy or practice of not tolerating undesirable behavior, such as violence or illegal drug use, especially in the automatic imposition of severe penalties for first offenses.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Middle school students today are under increased stress to attain a high level of achievement not only on an academic level, but also on a behavioral level as well. Many schools have followed a national model of Zero Tolerance for even minor infractions of school rules as a one-size-fits-all, quick-fix solution to curbing discipline problems with students (Martinez, 2009). What began as a response to deadly school violence perpetrated by a few students has turned into a snare that entraps students for even minor infractions. Implementation in my classroom of a character education program based on *The Four Agreements* (see Appendix A) can increase student tolerance of words and actions that can be perceived as threatening or offensive and allow students to diffuse situations before they become actionable by administrators. This may help reduce student frustration and stress levels associated with an atmosphere that many students regard as oppressive.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, zero tolerance policies call for predetermined and severe punishment for specific offenses such as weapons violations, narcotic use and sale, and serious physical assault (1995). Zero Tolerance policies came into effect following the passage of President Clinton's Guns Free School Act of 1995 (U.S. Department of Education), which mandated states to enact laws requiring a one year minimum suspension for students who bring a weapon to school. According to Fries and Demitchell (2007) in an effort to appear fair to all offenders, zero tolerance policies have expanded to include nonviolent infractions as well. Blanket judgments do not allow

for consideration of factors such as context of infraction, student history, intent, or even allowing teachers to provide their input into offenses. Students and teachers in Waterburg Middle School (fictitious name) have stated in class discussions that they feel these perspectives are necessary in order for punishment to be considered fair and that they receive due process.

Character Education is a term that is hard for researchers to define. Skaggs and Bodenhorn (2006) described good character as “the facility to consistently apply principles such as respect of others, truthfulness, fairness and responsibility towards others when faced with behavioral and ethical choices” (84). Skaggs and Bodenhorn paraphrased DeRoche and Williams’ (2001) definition of Character Education as any deliberate approach by which school personnel—in conjunction with parents and community members—help youths become caring, principled and responsible. Since Social Studies curricula include good and effective citizenship as one of the main goals, according to the National Council for Social Studies (1997) character education and civic education should be an integral part of a social studies curriculum.

In conjunction with civic education, character education in social studies will help students make moral decisions that bolster the democratic principles that were instrumental in the founding of the United States. According to Hoge (2002), character education began to be re-integrated into schools as part of an anti-drug education. The main purpose was to enable students to make ethical and moral decisions on their own instead of being told right from wrong (Hoge).

During my research into character education programs, I discovered several themes common to these programs. Of these traits that are deemed desirable, the district's schools' *Community of Caring* program promotes the following five character education traits: responsibility, caring, trust, respect, and family. *The Four Agreements* exemplified these traits as well as enabling individuals who wished to raise their own self esteem. This may help students find relief from the stresses of harsh discipline by removing the assumption that other students are acting against them.

One of the main criticisms of character education is that in order to be effective, character education must contain a moral component. Since morality is usually considered to be connected to religious doctrine it has been largely considered to be a private matter to be taught by parents. According to Damon (2002), character education is based on critical thinking skills and tolerance and was at one time viewed as moral values and "outside the realm of value choices" (viii). Damon sees a problem with the perception that because character education is teaching a moral component then it is, or could be opposed, by people who oppose teaching religion in schools. There is current scholarship to support character education that is modeled on the ideas of community and democratic ideals and does not need to "impose moral certitudes" (Nash, 1997) in order to be genuinely democratic. *The Four Agreements* is consistent with this concept.

Nash's postmodern democratic ideal supposed that each person must understand individual rights and obligations that bind the entire group (1997). Nash stated that each community should be based on friendship, trust, honesty, and decency or civility. Some of these qualities are categorized as group traits and others, honesty and decency, are

personal qualities that work together that allow whole groups to interact in a frank and productive way (Nash).

From the literature reviewed and the recent history of school based violence, good character education programs are essential not only for school safety but also to raise morale and reduce tension in what are becoming intolerant school environments (National Association of School Psychologists, 2008). In the current climate it is unlikely that schools will change their conduct policies in lieu of Character Education programs whose purpose is to encourage self improvement and self esteem on the part of the students. It is my hope that this model will allow students to gain the understanding and tolerance needed to navigate unfriendly environments.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Action research is the process by which teachers, administrators, and other school personnel identify an area of need in their school and take a systematic approach to address that area of need. Action Research differs from other types of research is that researchers attempt to “gain insight into human behavior in educational environments” (Mills, 2007).

This action research project involved observing student behavior in different settings where students congregate, socialize and let their guard down and engage in horseplay. There are hallways, especially after lunch period or gym, where many of my students have found themselves clashing with others or coming under the scrutiny of administrators who misinterpreted their interactions. Some of these behaviors include pushing, shoving, mock threats between friends, on one occasion I took one of my first period students aside to remind him of a classmate who was recently suspended for the pushing his friend in the hall. The cafeteria is another place where students are allowed to sit idly and socialize for a long period of time where students often air out their differences in ways that result in confrontation. I combined classroom instruction content with elements from the program I introduced as well as small group and whole class instruction. I introduced the Four Agreements in order to provide appropriate models of behavior and elements of the motivations historical figures that inspired them to effect change on a societal level.

Historical people who were chosen as models for students to emulate were Horace Mann, Mary Lyon, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Harriet Tubman whose altruistic motivations should have produced student historical empathy for those who were marginalized in 19th century society. Curriculum content for this unit relied on biographies, chosen by myself, that emphasized how each historical figure developed their worldview and how they worked to bring about change in 19th century American society. For example, Mary Lyon was an intelligent woman who was excluded from being a full participant in society due to her gender. Mary Lyon spent years as an assistant principal in various schools while trying to advance the cause of higher education for women. Since most colleges would not allow women to gain entry she solicited funds in order to found Mount Holyoke Female Seminary and extend higher education for women in order to benefit not only society as a whole, but also individual families.

Community and Context

My action research was conducted in an eighth grade regular level Social Studies class at the Waterburg* Middle School. This school serves the fifth to eighth grade student population of Waterburg* (fictitious name), a medium sized semi rural town in southern NJ. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (American Factfinder, 2000) Waterburg has approximately 32,800 residents with a median family income of \$56,000. The town is predominately Caucasian (84%), African American and Hispanic residents are 10.9% and 3.4% respectively. The school district is socioeconomically diverse. Once a predominantly white rural area, it is now a racially integrated suburban community. A

farming economy has been replaced by an economy with more professionals, serving as a bedroom community for the cities of Philadelphia, PA and Atlantic City, NJ, due to the building of many new subdivisions of houses that sell for over \$300,000. Waterburg has four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school.

School Background

The Waterburg* Middle School (WMS) serves 1850 students, in grades 5-8. The school population is made up of 70% Caucasian, 23% African American, 4% Hispanic, and 3% Pacific Islander and Asian students (New Jersey Department of Education, 2008).

The Character Education program that is employed by the school is entitled *Community of Caring*, which focuses on the Five Core Values; caring, respect, responsibility, trust and family. This program is designed to enable students to see their school community as a place where each person is concerned about others and is willing to help each other. The program is administered in all schools in the district, with teachers building on skills taught in previous years.

In the Waterburg Middle School teachers were initially given training in *The Community of Caring* program over the course of a school year through professional development workshops and in service instruction. New teachers are introduced to *The Community of Caring* program as part of their new teacher training. Teachers are required to reflect on their progress at the end of each school year through their Professional Improvement Plan in which they state how they can improve their pedagogical methods to better effect student behavior. Teachers are required to incorporate the elements of the

Character Education program into the curriculum and reflect these lessons in their daily lesson plans which are reviewed by the head teacher in each department .

My observations show little interest in the character education program among teachers. One teacher told me that when two teachers recently tried to coordinate character education with their peers it was perceived that their effort was only for their own benefit and their efforts were rebuffed. These anecdotes illustrate the disinterest teachers have for incorporating character education in their lessons plans.

Classroom

My 6th period class of 29 students consisted of 17 male students, 12 Caucasian, 3 African American, 1 Asian student, and 1 student who is of mixed Puerto Rican and Native American descent. There were 12 female students; 8 Caucasian, 2 African American, and 2 Hispanic students. The socioeconomic make up of the class was close to the demographic data as reported to the NJ Department of Education with the majority of students from middle class households (households earning more than \$55,000/year). This class took place right before the entire core goes to lunch at 12:42pm. Due to the lateness of the lunch period, this class could be hard to control and/or engage at times. This class was chosen because of the range of behavior issues and referrals stemming from incidents in the hall and the school cafeteria. In class this group poses few discipline problems and are in general cordial towards each other as opposed to other teachers in the core who report problematic behavior.

Participants

I chose six students, three boys and three girls, who volunteered to record their peer interactions and their understanding of *The Four Agreements* in hardcover journals that were provided me. Students were also asked to reflect on incidents where *The Four Agreements* may have been helpful to avoid conflicts and misunderstandings with other students. The study was limited to six students on the advice of my action research professor who felt that more students would make it too difficult for me to counsel and interpret data.

Three students, Mike*, Amanda* and Marnie*, were chosen based on the classroom teachers' recommendation that they did not have any behavior referrals; Marnie was chosen because of her outspoken attitude in class. She often joined class discussions and was not afraid to state an opinion that was different from my own. Amanda and Mike were bright students whose work showed a mature understanding of curriculum content and written essays exemplified a high standard of clarity and structure. I hoped that their journals would reflect a mature understanding of *The Four Agreements* and objective reflection on their daily interactions with other students. One student, Steve*, was chosen because of his self-professed anger management deficiency. He stated, during an open class discussion on character education that his lack of control of his temper had caused him to be suspended in several occasions. Despite his low tolerance he seemed willing to participate in the research.

The final two students were chosen because of an incident that caused the female student (Sarah*) to have the male student (Vin*) suspended from class for ten days. In

my opinion, this was one example of an overuse of the Zero Tolerance discipline policy. I hoped that I could analyze each student's account in order to summarize their behavior and use the data as a model of how *The Four Agreements* could have been instrumental in avoiding misunderstandings.

Data Sources

The main source of data to be used in this research was student reflections on their school day and how they interact and come into conflict with other students. This study took place over an 11 week period between February 23, 2009 and May 8, 2009. Students were issued a journal with a copy of *The Four Agreements*, simplified for easier understanding, taped to the inside cover. This gave each student a reference for how they could incorporate their own behavior and those of others in order to avoid misunderstandings. Students were instructed to reflect on their school day each night and record any incidents that *The Four Agreements* could have helped them or others in diffusing. Journals were collected every Friday afternoon and returned to student's Monday Morning.

I assured each student that their journals were to be kept private and that I would use pseudonyms to protect their identities in the writing of this thesis. They were assured that the only person who would read their journals would be me and that they would be burned at the conclusion of this research. Students were also instructed that if they threatened other students or themselves, then I would be required to report it to school authorities. These instructions were designed to develop a sense of trust between myself and each student.

Other data included informal conversations with students, my cooperating teacher, and other teachers that were instrumental in the students' daily school routine. The purpose of the informal conservations was to get more information on student behavior in other class contexts and their opinions on school life and any perceived problems with the school discipline policy. My effect on student behavior stems from my physical size and appearance and my reputation as a former Marine. I stand six feet four inches tall and weigh over 300 pounds, an imposing authority figure, and even though I try to keep my classroom demeanor light, students rarely challenge me directly. By gathering the impressions of student behavior from other teachers I was able to compare their behavior in other classes to the behavior I witnessed in my class. To illustrate this point, the math teacher in this core told me that she had trouble with Mike on more than one occasion. She stated that he was sometimes disrespectful and defiantly disruptive, something that never happened in my class.

CHAPTER 4

Findings, Analysis, and Interpretations

Findings

Reliance on student journals turned out to be the “Achilles heel” of this project. Two students, Mike* and Steve,* refused to journal at all even though they consented to participate knowing that it was a part of this project. Talks with them and attempts to assure them of their privacy were to no avail. I suspect, by their evasive answers to my questions, that they did not fully trust that I would not share their journal entries with school administrators. Steve stated that he had incidents with the Police officer stationed at the school and did not want to chance that his personal feelings would be used against him. Three other participants only used their journal to reflect on a single incident that affected them while this study was conducted.

Further attempts to attain more in depth reflections were met with assurances that they did not have any other conflicts to which *The Four Agreements* applied. The final student, Vin*, only used his journal to record his feelings of injustice with the school system following another suspension. His journal entry was unusable for this research, not only was it off task and did not address his understanding of *The Four Agreements* but it was laced with censored expletives. Vin was frustrated after another lengthy suspension (5 days) during which I had no contact with him.

Neither Sarah nor Vin wrote in their journals about the verbal incident that resulted in Vin being suspended for 10 days, which was one of the requirements of their participation in the study. I was unable to question them about the incident until near the

end of my tenure at their school. We, my cooperating teacher and I, were given explicit instructions by the vice principal that these two students were to be kept separated and to not allow them to have any contact in the classroom. Because of this restriction, I did not feel comfortable questioning them about this incident until I noticed that they were able to participate in class activities and discussions without either student showing ill feelings. This was about 8 weeks following the incident and near the time I was to leave the school at the conclusion of my clinical practice.

My classes centered on student debate of some of the most controversial subjects in American history such as slavery and prejudice. During a discussion on Abraham Lincoln's view of equality, I noticed that when Vin was speaking forcefully Sarah did not react with her usual look of disgust toward him. Although their relationship became less contentious they were unwilling to discuss the incident in any detail save for Sarah's assertion that she did not realize Vin would be suspended for ten days for what she considered was a minor incident and Vin expressed his frustration at the lack of due process and what he considered an uneven use of the discipline policy. Vin felt that he was singled out due to his ethnic background by a Caucasian vice principal. This supposition cannot be correlated since the school district could not provide me with discipline statistics.

Analysis

Analysis occurred simultaneously as I collected data. I reviewed my field notes each day to measure my ability to incorporate and model *The Four Agreements* in class and to modify upcoming lessons to further illustrate these principles. Analysis of

observations of student interactions in informal settings and informal conversations with other teachers allowed me to measure student behavior in settings other than in my class.

Interpretation

As I read the journal entries that were pertinent to my research, it became clear to me that the students who participated in this research project did not attain the maturity necessary to enable them to make *The Four Agreements* an intrinsic part of the way they interact with others. According to Piaget's theories of cognitive development in early adolescence, students at their age should move from the concrete stage of cognitive development into the formal operations stage (Huitt, 2003) at their age. The concrete stage is characterized by the "logical and systematic manipulation of symbols related to concrete objects" (Huitt), or in this case the task given them. Students were asked to reflect on how they could have used *The Four Agreements* in situations where they felt they were in conflict with other students.

Only two students stayed on task and produced one entry each. In both instances the students applied a literal meaning to the task; that is they took the task at hand and applied it in a literal way with very little abstract reasoning. Both student entries show a systematic approach to *The Four Agreements*, they applied only the agreements that they thought they followed in each circumstance and could not see how they could apply the philosophy as a whole. For example, in Marnie's journal entry she recounted how she thought this philosophy could have helped her by applying only the second and third principles of *The Four Agreements*, "do not take anything personally and do not make assumptions" (Ruiz, 1997) when she reflected on a conflict she had with me.

Marnie is usually a well behaved student in class; she took exception to the fact that I changed her seat assignment in class when she had trouble containing her giggling. Her journal entry stated that her complaint to the guidance counselor about the incident was an overreaction on her part, as she stated "I was taking a lot of things personally at this time". She further stated that she assumed she was being singled out as an example to the class and she would not have reacted so severely had she simply asked me about my motivations. She could not make the intuitive leap that would have enabled her to apply the philosophy as a whole and we could have talked about this incident without the referral to guidance. Incidentally, she voiced concern about going to the guidance counselor, and I assured her she followed the correct procedure for student teacher conflict resolution.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions

Summary

This Action Research project attempted to affect students' peer to peer interactions in order for students to self monitor themselves and each other to reduce conflicts and misunderstandings, and to avoid harsh punishments required by zero tolerance discipline policies. The project was based on *The Four Agreements*, an esoteric code of conduct based on ancient Toltec wisdom and refined and simplified for eighth grades students. By enabling students to use this philosophy as an intrinsic part of their school interactions they could improve the classroom behavior and enhance classroom interactions.

The setting for this study was one eighth grade class in the middle school of a medium sized town in New Jersey. The classroom setting was modified from a lecture arrangement to a Learning Community Classroom (Putnam & Burke, 2006) in order to facilitate student participation and to enable student critical thinking skills by introducing an open discussion format. I hoped that this atmosphere would also facilitate a relationship of trust between me and the students who were to actively participating in chronicling their school interactions.

This project was carried out over a nine week period and linked to the Social Studies curriculum of the Reform Era and the Antebellum periods in American History. The historical context of how the worldview of historical reformers was shaped served as a model for students to understand how a change in a society, large or small, benefits all

members. During this time a small group of diverse students were to reflect on their interactions with others and record how *The Four Agreements* did or could have helped them to improve their interactions with other students.

Conclusions and New Directions

Teaching Character Education can be a difficult task in an atmosphere when students and faculty pay scant attention to the program that is in place. As students reach higher grades it becomes more difficult to incorporate character education in lesson plans among the diverse subjects and different teachers' students have each day.

In the Waterburg Middle School fifth and sixth grade students spend most of the school day with their classroom teachers, as they reach seventh and eighth grades they change rooms and teachers. Of the six classes I taught, two had different math and language arts teachers than the others, making it impossible to keep continuity of teaching *The Four Agreements* and having students practice them in all classes. Near the end of my student teaching experience, I inquired into how the Community of Caring program was implemented in the eighth grade classes.

The answer I received confirmed my opinion that character education is difficult to teach older students and needs to be a concerted effort among teachers and the school. I was told by one teacher that there was no concerted effort among teachers to incorporate the program into their teaching. In fact I was told that the last effort was met with scorn by teachers who assumed the effort was being done for the personal aggrandizement of those who were trying to make the effort (Personal communication,

2009). This made it apparent that the efforts of a single teacher with one small group of students would have little effect on students.

According to Skaggs and Bodenhor (2006) since character education depends on teaching character-related behavior, not specific behavior, there is no set way to measure its effectiveness. I could only measure its effectiveness in the improvement in class decorum during social studies classes and the perceived improvement between Sarah and Vin. I do not know how much student behavior improved due to my physical presence and demeanor as I noted earlier but during discussions on polarizing issues such as women's rights and equality and racial issues both historical and contemporary. Early in my teaching experience students would interrupt each other and shout each other down. Since the introduction of class debate was fairly new students lacked the appropriate rules of behavior to govern debates. Shortly after introducing *The Four Agreements* incidents of student interruption in most classes waned with a few exceptions as they self monitored their interactions.

My perceptions of the effectiveness of teaching character education may be colored by my desire to see the philosophy work even on a small scale. The lack of time and student participation further hampered my efforts to measure the effectiveness of this project. Student documentation of how they felt about the philosophy was not a priority as they prepared for the standardized test that is mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

Implications and Recommendations

In future studies and application of Character Education professional behavioral scientists should implement a philosophy along with the Character Education program in place. While the school wide program focuses on the universal characteristics that are to be made intrinsic *The Four Agreements* focuses on peer to peer interactions. A trained behavioral scientist can better modify instruction and measure effectiveness during the period of study, which in my opinion should be a minimum of an entire school year. Ten weeks was too short a time for 8th grade students who were still in the concrete operational stage of their development to make a new set of behavior rules an intrinsic part of their personality. This research may have been more successful if this behavior was modeled and taught from the beginning of the school year.

A behavioral scientist would also provide objective observations of student progress in making Character Education principles an intrinsic part of their peer to peer interactions. As stated earlier, I believe that despite my best efforts my perceptions of the effectiveness of teaching character education may have been colored by my overconfidence and lack of experience.

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APPENDIX A

The Four Agreements

1. Be Impeccable With Your Word

Speak with integrity. Say only what you mean. Avoid using the word to speak against yourself or to gossip about others. Use the power of your word in the direction of truth and love.

2. Don't Take Anything Personally

Nothing others do is because of you. What others say and do is a projection of their own reality, their own dream. When you are immune to the opinions and actions of others, you won't be the victim of needless suffering.

3. Don't Make Assumptions

Find the courage to ask questions and to express what you really want. Communicate with others as clearly as you can to avoid misunderstandings, sadness and drama. With just this one agreement, you can completely transform your life.

4. Always Do Your Best

Your best is going to change from moment to moment; it will be different when you are healthy as opposed to sick. Under any circumstance, simply do your best and you will avoid self-judgment, self-abuse and regret.

The Four Agreements

Make your life the best it can possibly be.

1. **Be Impeccable with your word:** speak clearly and directly to your peers and to yourself. **Do not** gossip about others.
2. **Don't Take Anything Personally:** Nothing others do is because of you. What others say about you is an image of their view of you. When you are free from the actions & opinions of others you will not be a victim.
3. **Don't Make Assumptions:** Find the strength to ask someone to make their meaning clear. Clear communication will help avoid misunderstandings, conflict, & drama.
4. **Always Do Your Best:** Always do the best you can, no matter how you are feeling & you will avoid self judgment & regret.

"In these agreements we tell ourselves who we are, how to behave, what is possible, what is impossible."

APPENDIX B

Parental Consent Letter

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I am a graduate student in the MST Program in Teacher Education Department at Rowan University. I am currently student teaching in Mr. H's class at W* Middle School and I will be conducting a research project under the supervision of Dr. Beth Wassell as part of my master's action research project concerning how to increase student tolerance and acceptance through the introduction of a code of conduct based on "The Four Agreements." I am requesting permission for your child to participate in this research. The goal of the study is to help students develop skills that will facilitate increased understanding between peers and decrease conflict as students prepare to navigate their high school environment.

Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate in this study will have absolutely no effect on your child's standing in his/her class. At the conclusion of the study a summary of the group results will be made available to all interested parents. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at (846)-629-7444 ext. 3803 after 3pm or you may contact Dr. Beth Wassell at (856) 256-4500ext.3802. Thank you.

Sincerely,

William M. Suarez

APPENDIX C

NIH CERTIFICATE



Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **William Suarez** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course “Protecting Human Research Participants”.

Date of completion: 01/21/2009

Certification Number: 161357



APPENDIX D

Sample of Administration Interview

What offenses are covered by the zero tolerance policy?

Would it be beneficial to inform teachers of infractions when students are referred for a 3-7?

Why is after school suspension preferred?

What happened to the bully boxes & the old anti-bullying policy?

How is the Community of Caring program implemented in the 7th & 8th grades?

What training do teachers & administrators receive for the program?

Who is in charge of the program?

APPENDIX E

Sample of Field Notes

March 27, 2009

I had a discussion with Marnie and her friend regarding the incident that caused her to speak with a guidance counselor about feeling I singled her out in class.

She told me the thing that upset her most was that I told her “her friends were bringing her down”. Since this statement seemed to be out of character for me, I reflected on the incident and reminded her that one of the responsibilities of the new seating arrangement was that each student needed to regulate their own behavior and if they wanted to sit with their friends they could not disrupt the class with out of control giggling.

In one of her journal entries she reflected on how she thought about *The Four Agreements* could have helped in relation to this incident. She stated that if she had applied it to the situation she would have felt comfortable enough to talk to me without going to guidance.

