External Program Evaluation for "Building Communities of Character"

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INTRODUCTION

"Building Communities of Character" is a youth program designed to generate a sense of community cohesion and shared values among staff and children participating in after-school programs. This program has been adapted for elementary school settings drawing from prior experiences with the "Building Intentional Communities" curriculum designed by Sangita Kumar and Tanya Mayo of *Be the Change Consulting* of Oakland, California intended for use with adolescents. The long-range goals of the staff training associated with this program are to generate a skill set among after school teaching staff that will build their sense of group cohesion and commitment to shared social and moral values, and enhance their capacity to build children's sense of shared community values, social justice, behavioral self-management, social and emotional development, and critical thinking.

This evaluation focuses upon the effectiveness of staff training implemented by *Be the Change Consulting* with staff from after school programs at three Oakland, California public elementary schools. These three schools: Sankofa Academy, Markham Elementary School, Manzanita Community Elementary School all serve urban minority children from kindergarten through fifth grade. The staff training took place during the Spring of 2011. The evaluation was designed to capture the impact of the training upon staff at the three participating sites, and to assess the impact of the program upon children's social development and sense of community in the short-term and after an extended period of program enactment.

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DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

Impact Upon Staff

The evaluation used a combination of surveys, classroom observations, and staff focus groups to measure the impact of the program on the after school staff teaching beliefs and practices. (All instruments used in the evaluation are available upon request.) A working assumption of this evaluation was that the staff training would have a measurable positive impact upon the beliefs and practices of the teaching staff by the end of the 12-week training period. The evaluation employed a pre and post-test design to measure program impact. Classroom observations and staff self –reports were used to estimate the faithfulness of program implementation.

Measures of teaching staff beliefs and practices.

Surveys (*Oakland After School Staff Inventory)* designed to assess the impact of the training upon program staff were administered to staff just prior to the onset of staff training, and at the end of the 12-week training period. The survey included two scales described below. Surveys were completed online through Survey Monkey. A total of 14 (74 percent) of the 19 staff completed both the pre and post-test surveys.

1. **Sense of efficacy** (teachers' belief in their own capacity) to impact children's social and moral development. This was assessed using a survey instrument: *Moral Development and Character Education Belief Survey* adapted from a measure of teacher self-efficacy employed in research by Milson (2002) and Nucci (2006) that has been employed with pre-service elementary education majors and practicing elementary school teachers. This instrument measures whether teachers believe that children's moral values and

character can be impacted by teacher practices, or whether children's morality and character are determined entirely by factors external to the school (e.g., family, neighborhood) and therefore beyond the reach of teachers. Prior work has demonstrated that teacher self-efficacy is associated with teacher effectiveness (Milson, 2002). The inter-tem reliability of the *Development and Character Education Belief Survey* in the present evaluation (Cronbach's Alpha) was .85.

2. **Knowledge of constructs and teaching practices** central to the *Building Communities of Character*. A new survey measure: *After School Beliefs and Practices* was developed by the researchers to assess whether the staff training resulted in an increased adoption of the core values and teaching assumptions. The survey includes two scales one of which assess teacher beliefs, and second which assess teachers' self-reports of their own teaching practices. The items used in this scale were reviewed by *Be The Change Consulting* to insure that the program designers agreed that the items corresponded to the goals of the Building Communities of Character staff training curriculum. The inter-tem reliability of the *After School Teaching Beliefs* scale also reached an acceptable level (Chronback Alpha .69).

Assessment of Program Implementation

An estimate of the faithfulness with which staff carried out the curriculum and activities presented during the staff training was obtained from on-site observations, supplemented by staff self-reports during the focus groups completed at the end of the program training period.

1. **On site Observations** Observations were conducted at each of the after-school sites by a trained research assistant in her dissertation year in the UC Berkeley doctoral program in school psychology. These observations included a running narrative, and a classroom observation checklist designed to assess staff teaching practices. Items in the checklist

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pertained to classroom climate and décor as well as teacher behaviors. The list of teacher behaviors focused upon items being emphasized in the staff training. Observations were conducted at each of the three school sites on three occasions: program onset, midway through the staff training, and near the completion of the staff training. Each observation was for a 90-minute period.

2. **Focus Groups** A second source of information regarding program implementation came from staff self-reports and comments during the focus groups conducted at the end of the staff training. These focus groups will be described in more detail below.

Impact Upon Students

The assessment of the impact of the staff training upon students was estimated from three sources: student surveys, teacher surveys, and teacher statements during focus groups. A working hypothesis of the evaluation was that the 12-week training period would result in some indications of a positive impact upon student attitudes and behavior, but would be too short a time span for there to be definitive measurable impact of the training upon students. Moreover, since the completion of the training period coincided with the end of the school year, it was impossible to assess the full impact of the staff training on students within the current academic year (2010-2011). Thus, the evaluation was designed to assess the potential impact upon student attitudes and behavior through student self-reports at three time periods: prior to the staff training (March, 2011), at the completion of the staff training (June, 2011), and at the end of October 2011. This report includes outcomes from the pre-training and initial post-training assessment (June 2011).

Student Surveys

Student perceptions of the impact of the training were obtained through surveys that focused upon two broad issues: sense of the after-school program as a community, and the impact of the

program on student behavior. Surveys were administered to students from grades 3-5 who had received parental permission. All of the students across sites received permission, and all of them completed the surveys unless they were absent. A total of 82 students (77 percent) completed both the pre and post –test surveys.

Surveys were completed at the individual sites prior to the staff training and again after the completion of staff training. Surveys were administered by a trained graduate assistant who read the survey items aloud to maximize comprehension for students who might have reading difficulties. As compensation for their participation, students all received a UC Berkeley pencil and were eligible for a drawing at each site in which they could win a $10 gift certificate to a local bookstore. The surveys provided to students were adapted from measures constructed by the Developmental Studies Center of Oakland, CA. The surveys were comprised of 8 sub-scales listed below along with their reliability coefficients.

Table 1 Alpha Reliability Coefficients for Student Attitude and Behavior Scales (highest to lowest)

	Cronbach's Alpha	# of Items
Disruptive Behavior	0.882	17
Altruistic Behavior	0.847	8
Trust in and Respect for Teachers	0.804	10
Social Competence	0.741	12
Enjoyment for Helping Others Learn	0.715	5
Sense of School as a Community	0.702	9
Classroom Supportiveness	0.691	14
Concern for Others	0.532	6

Staff Surveys

The surveys completed by the after-school teaching staff prior to and after completion of the training period also included scales assessing their perceptions of the degree to which the children participating in the program engaged in positive or negative behaviors. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach Alpha) for the scale assessing positive behavior was .85; for negative behavior .64.

Staff Perceptions of the Training Program

The final element of the evaluation was an assessment of the perceptions that the staff maintained regarding the value of the training program for the staff and for the students. This was accomplished through a scale attached to the survey administered to all staff at the completion of the training program, and through focus groups held at each site following the end of the training.

1. **Staff Survey**

The staff survey was comprised of 13 items previously employed by *Be The Change Consulting* to engage in program assessment of their *Building Intentional Communities* staff training.

2. **Focus Groups**

Focus groups were conducted at each site following the completion of the staff training. For two of the sites, the focus groups took place during the final week of school. The focus groups were led by the program evaluator with the graduate research assistant in attendance acting as the note taker. The conversations were also audio recorded. The focus group conversations were based on a set of standardized questions and lasted between 60-90 minutes. Refreshments were provided and participants each received a $10 gift card to a book store at completion of the focus group. Participants were not aware ahead of time that they would receive the gift cards. A total of 16 of 19 staff members (84 percent) attended the focus groups.

OUTCOMES

Initial statistical analyses revealed no significant differences in either staff or student responses as a function of program site. Thus the evaluation outcomes will be reported for all of the sites combined.

Fidelity of Program Implementation

Observations conducted at three time periods at each program site provided evidence that staff did adjust their curricula and teaching practices over the training period in line with the program goals. Thus, there was direct evidence that the training did achieve the goal of influencing staff teaching practices. Initial observations at each site indicated that the after school staff generally treated one another and the students with respect, and worked constructively to manage student misbehavior. Thus, these sites were already in many ways positive environments for students prior to the staff training. Prior to staff training, however, there was no evidence that staff maintained a shared set of program values or goals. Moreover, not all staff appeared to have lesson plans prepared ahead of time, and most appeared to rely upon traditional modes of student behavioral management discipline.

Subsequent observations recorded shifts in staff behavior toward the inclusion of specific elements of the program curriculum. By the time of the third observation, staff at all three sites were making an effort to implement the program curriculum and make use of specific program activities. This is not to say, however, that all staff were uniformly enacting the program

curriculum and activities as intended. A minority of staff appeared to misrepresent or misunderstand the purposes and procedures of specific program activities, and were observed providing incorrect instructions to students regarding games and activities that were part of the curriculum. However, most of the staff did incorporate the program curriculum in the after school programs and did implement the specific activities correctly. More importantly, all of the staff appeared to have attempted to transmit a shared set of values and expectations to students by the end of the training period.

A consistent theme in staff comments in the focus groups was that the training did help them to identify a set of three shared core values, and that the training did afford the staff with practical activities that allowed the teachers to translate these shared goals and values with their students. Thus, the training was clearly successful in forging a common set of values and goals among the after school staff. In addition, the staff training also clearly provided teachers with practical hands-on activities to help them translate these goals and values to their students. Our observations also indicated that program fidelity was not uniform across staff members, and that the training in and of itself did not allow for guidance or corrective feedback to staff members in their actual delivery of the program to students.

Student Attitudes and Behavior

Statistical analyses of the differences between pre and post-test scores on the student surveys were conducted with students from all grades 3 - 5, and with students in grades 4 and 5 only. This was done to determine whether the reading levels of third grade students might impact their responses to the survey items. Findings revealed that there were no differences in overall means whether the scores for third grade students were included. Thus, all analyses reported are for students in all grade levels participating in the after school program. As anticipated the results of

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student surveys turned up no statistically significant effects for the program training upon student attitudes or behaviors. The results of comparisons of pre and post-test surveys employing *t*-test for repeated measures are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Repeated Measures t-tests for Student Attitude and Behavior Scales

Scale	Mean Difference	Pre-Mean	Post-Mean	T	Significance	df
Disruptive Behavior	-0.02132	1.4485	1.4699	-0.513	0.609	79
Altruistic Behavior	0.07870	2.9830	2.9043	1.011	0.315	80
Trust in and Respect for Teachers	0.00988	2.9951	2.9852	0.160	0.874	80
Social Competence	-0.05696	3.1097	3.1667	-1.021	0.311	78
Enjoyment for Helping Others Learn	0.16790	3.3481	3.1802	2.476	**0.015**	80
Sense of School as a Community	-0.02881	2.8148	2.8436	-0.445	0.658	80
Classroom Supportiveness	-0.6790	2.6102	2.6781	-1.322	0.190	80
Concern for Others	0.01899	2.8186	2.7996	0.274	0.784	78

Scores for only one scale (*Enjoyment for Helping Others Learn)* of the eight scales in the survey reached statistical significance, and the direction of change was in the negative direction (students reported less perceived enjoyment for helping others learn at the end of the training

period). However, given the number of scales in the student measure, that finding was itself

attributable to chance. Thus, students in the after school program did not report any discernable

shift in their perceptions of student attitudes or behavior at the end of the staff training period.

Staff surveys revealed that the staff also did not discern any statistically significant shifts in

student behaviors as a result of the staff training. These findings are summarized in Table 3. As

can be seen in the table, the perceptions of negative and positive student behaviors showed no

change from the pre-test to post-test surveys.

Table 3 Staff Ratings of Negative and Positive Student Behavior

Scale	*Mean Difference*	*Pre-Mean*	*Post-Mean*	*T*	*Signifi cance*	*d f*
Negative Student Behaviors	-0.23077	2.5000	2.7308	-1.760	0.104	12
Positive Student Behaviors	-0.15385	4.0513	4.2051	-0.604	0.557	12

Although these survey results show no change in student attitudes or behaviors as a result of the

staff training, staff comments during the focus groups did include observations from staff at all

three sites that teachers were noting discernable changes in students' expressed attitudes

consonant with the *Building Communities of Character* program goals. For example, staff

members across sites provided specific examples of students displaying greater openness to one

another, and increased willingness to tolerate differences as a result of program based discussions

on the meaning and value of "openness", and games that engaged students in reflecting upon

their individual characteristics and commonalities.   Staff in one site, for example, described a

situation in which fifth grade students openly expressed support for a student who had trouble

reading aloud. At that same site staff indicated that students appeared to be reaching out and making friendships across grade levels. At another site students were said to place less emphasis on what's "cool" and that competitiveness had been toned down. These shifts were associated with staff perceptions that students were becoming better able to manage and to take responsibility and control over their own behavior. This latter observation was a theme across sites in which attitudinal shifts attributed to the program were associated with reductions in the number and severity of conflicts between and among the students.

As noted above, these staff perceptions expressed in the focus groups were not born out, however, in the survey data from either the students or staff, and should probably be taken as indicators that student attitudes and behaviors may be moving in a positive direction that will become more apparent over time.

Staff Efficacy, Beliefs, and Practices

The results of staff surveys and comments made during the focus groups provided ample evidence that the training had a positive impact on teacher beliefs regarding their teaching practices.

Efficacy

As can be seen in Table 4 and illustrated in Figure 1 the staff training resulted in a substantial and statistically significant boost in staff beliefs in their own efficacy as moral and character educators. The shift represents a move from disagreeing with the prospect that teachers can impact student moral development and character to believing that staff could have such an impact.

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Table 4 Staff Moral and Character Education Efficacy Beliefs

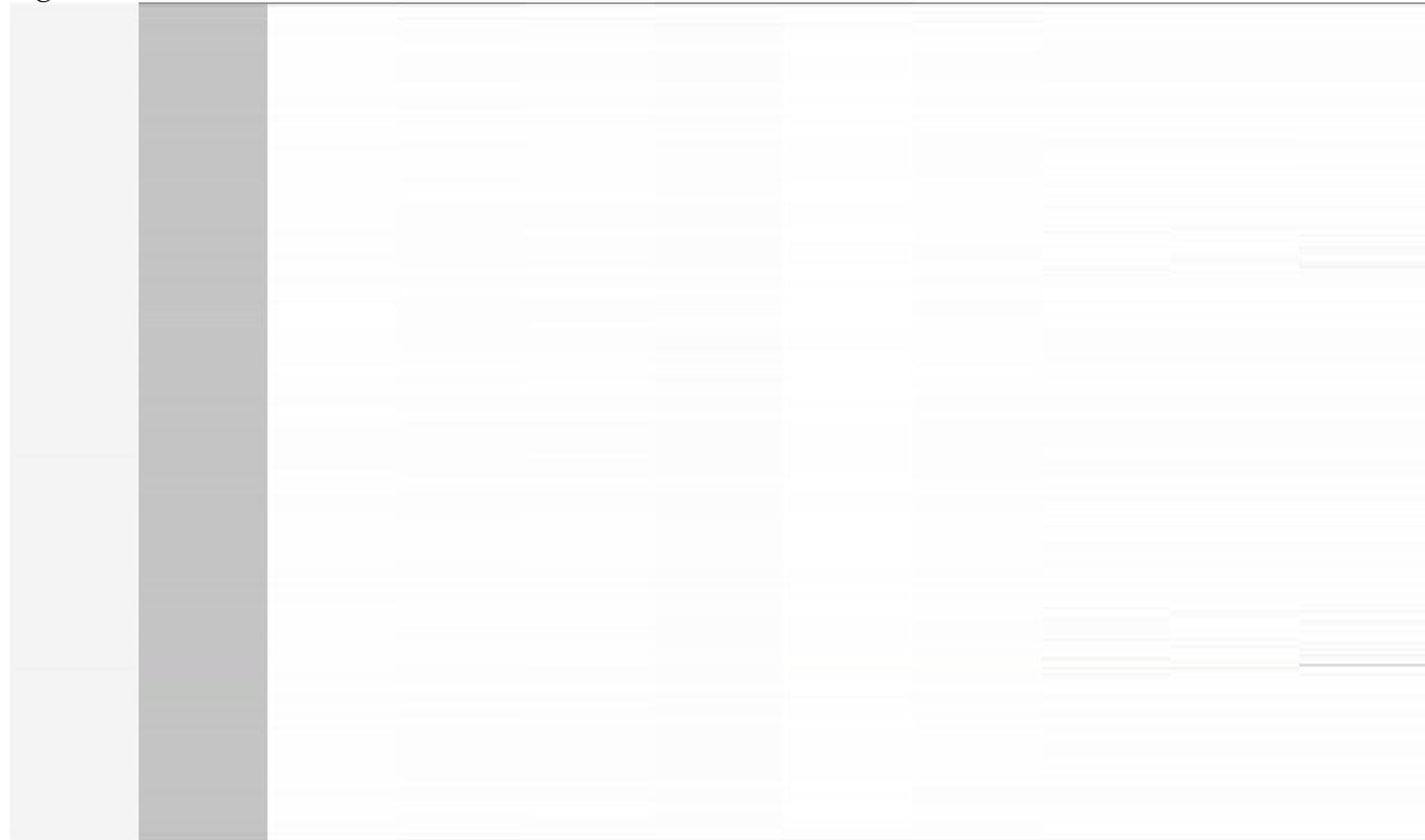| Scale	Mean Difference	Pre-Mean	Post-Mean	T	Significance	df
Moral and Character Development Teacher Efficacy Beliefs (18 items)	- 1.18803	2.4188	3.6068	-8.988	**0.000***	12

Figure 1
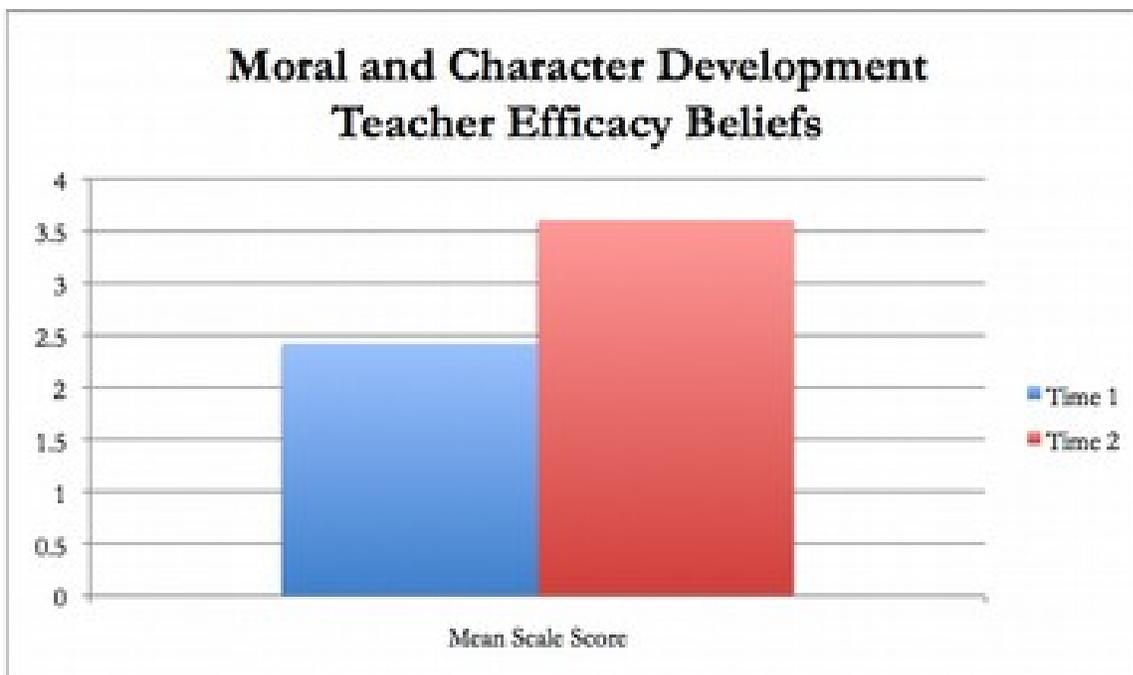
Teaching Beliefs

The staff training had a positive impact upon a broad range of beliefs about the characteristics of an effective after school program, and the perceptions that staff had about the practices enacted within their own program. These beliefs were all core tenets of the *Building Communities of Character* program. Table 5 presents the pre and post-test means scores for the scale as a whole and for the individual scale items. Figure 2 provides an illustration of the shifts for individual items that reached statistical significance.

Table 5 After School Teaching Beliefs and Program Perceptions

Scale	Mean Difference	Pre-Mean	Post-Mean	T	Significance	df
After School Teaching Beliefs	**-1.54808**	**2.3173**	**3.8654**	**-6.417**	**0.000***	**12**
Individual Items						
1. Staff in our program work with children based on their own personal set of values.	-0.53846	2.5385	3.08	-1.289	0.222	12
2. An after school program works best if there is a diversity of core ethical values maintained and promoted by the staff.	-2.07692	2.000	4.08	-4.999	**0.000***	12
3. Staff in my after school program share the same core ethical values.	-1.38462	2.6154	4.00	-3.600	**0.004***	12
4. Staff in my after school program have discussed our core ethical values.	-1.69231	2.3846	4.08	-4.638	**0.001***	12
5. Children should be involved in helping establish the rules of our after school program.	-2.46154	1.8462	4.31	-9.174	**0.000***	12
6. An after school program works best if each staff person works with children based on their own personal ethical values.	-0.23077	2.8462	3.08	-0.507	0.621	12
7. An after school program works best if there is a shared common set of core ethical values promoted by the staff.	-2.30769	2.00	4.31	-6.653	**0.000***	12
8. I know and can name the core ethical values of our after school program.	-1.6932	2.3077	4.00	-4.63	**0.001***	12

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Figure 2

As can be seen in Table 5 staff moved in their beliefs about teaching practices toward agreement with the notions that an after-school program works best when staff share a set of core values, and engage students in helping to create after school behavioral norms. Perhaps what is more important is that the staff reported perceiving their after-school programs as having shifted toward those practices. There were positive shifts toward perceiving their after school program as having a shared set of values, resulting from a staff discussion about core values, and being able to identify and name the core values maintained by their after school programs.

Teaching Practices

The staff survey also focused upon a number of specific teaching practices. There were two central concerns regarding staff perceptions of their own teaching practices. The first was whether the staff training would impact staff views about the importance of lesson preparation and planning. The second was whether the staff training would shift teachers away from an external control mindset for managing student misconduct, toward an emphasis on providing students with the skills to engage in their own conflict resolution. In both cases the training had a positive impact on staff perceptions. With respect to lesson planning, teachers prior to the training were relatively split between those who improvised or created their lessons on the spot and those who planned in advance. After the training this shifted dramatically such that 80 percent of teachers stated that they wrote their lesson plans in advance each week (Chi Square (2) = 6.76, p < .05). This shift is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3
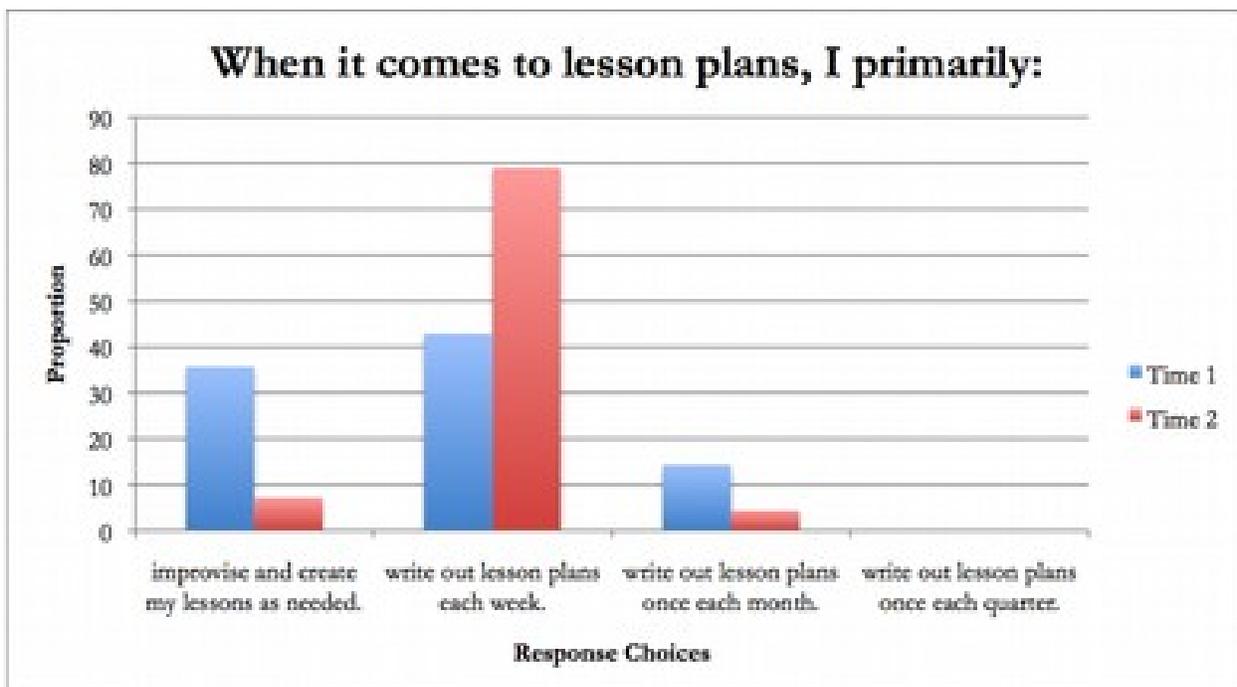
With regard to perceptions of the best way to reduce fighting, approximately half of the staff prior to the training endorsed having a zero tolerance policy against fighting as the most effective approach. Following the training, only 20 percent of the staff endorsed this position, while 70 percent now perceived that the most effective strategy would be to provide training in social skills for conflict resolution (Chi Square (2) = 334.523, p < .0001. This is illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4
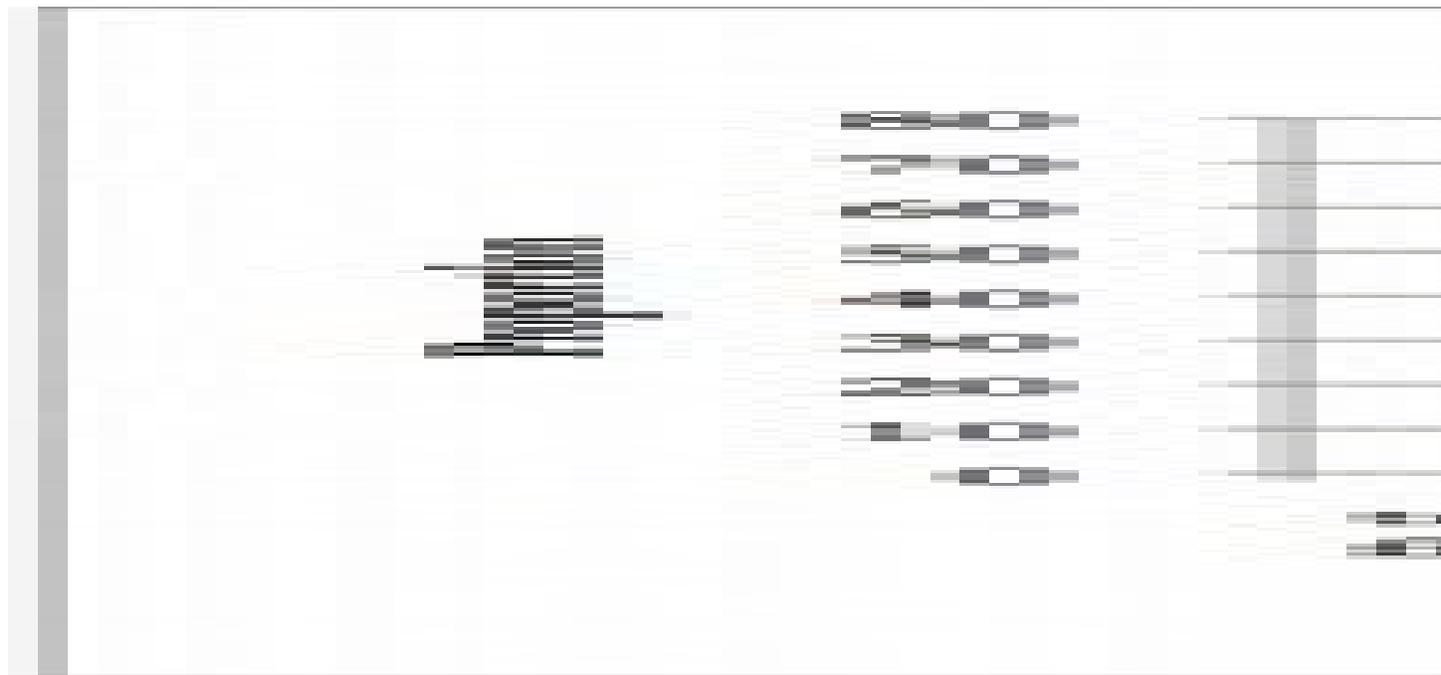
Thus, the training had a positive impact upon two core practices central to the approach advocated in the *Building Communities of Character* program.

While the other related practices evaluated through the evaluation survey also moved in the positive direction, the shifts from the pre to post-test did not reach significance. Nonetheless, the overall direction was toward the goals advocated by the training. Moreover, the focus group conversations provided evidence that staff did employ specific activities and practices introduced during the training.

Staff Perceptions of the Value of the Training Program

The final element of the program evaluation assessed the staff perceptions of the quality and value of the training they received through the *Building Communities of Character* staff development. As can be seen in Figure 5 the staff provided a very strong endorsement for the program. The overall rating given was 4.6 out of a possible 5. All but one of the item scores was 4.0 or above. That item referred to the pace of the program and most likely refers to the fact that the program did not take place until the latter part of the academic year. One strong recommendation that emerged during the focus group discussions was that the program should begin as early as possible in the school year. The staff also requested that the training be resumed for them as a refresher again next Fall.

Figure 5
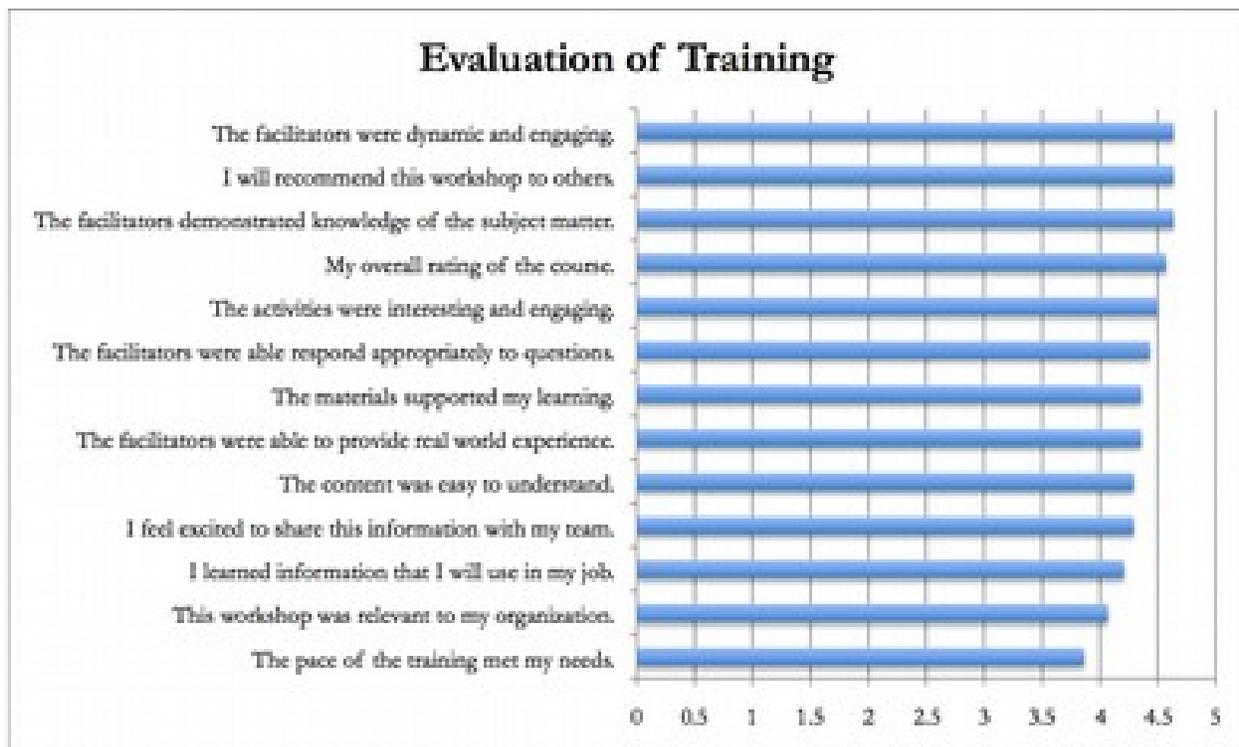
Feedback obtained during the focus groups also helps to flesh out staff perceptions of the value of the traing they received. One thing that stood out in the course of the focus groups was that

staff from each of the three sites could clearly articulate a set of skills they received from the training. These included improved stratgeies for handling student discipline, that were non-punitive and non-coercive. Teachers also commented on the value of the materials and strategies provided in the program for helping to build student friendships and a sense of community. The staff members also commented on the value of the program for improving their own personal sense of community and capacity. The staff deeply appreciated the sense that the trainers from *Be The Change Consulting* seemed to genuinely understand the challenges and the role of after school programs. As one staff meber put it, "They get after school." Another staff member stated, "The training was empathetic to the challenges after-school staff experiences."

When asked whether they would recommend the training for other after school programs, the staff respoonded unanimously in the affirmative: "Yes, it brings the staff together as a family." "The trainers were great" "Sangita has been a great mentor." "The training helps the staff get together and provides an opportunity for them to build as a team. It teaches skills that can be used wherever they go." "The training gave teachers different ways to handle problem behaviors. It encouraged a family-like atmosphere where teachers and students are respectful of one another." "The trainers considered the community and the students' backgrounds. They made the lessons realistic for the students." And finally, "Every after-school program should have this training."

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this evaluation indicate that the staff training associated with the *Building Communities of Character* program provided by Be The Change Consulting was largely successful in its basic aims to impact after school staff teacher self-efficacy, beliefs, and teaching practices relevant to establishing a healthy classroom and school community. Commensurate

with these objective measures of program impact, surveys and focus groups indicated that the program enjoyed widespread strong support among the after school staff. This support was largely a function of staff perceptions that the training had provided useful information and specific guidance regarding activities and skills that could be used in their own teaching. Thus, the training can objectively be judged as effective, and has having met the goals established by the program.

There was, however, less evidence for an impact upon student beliefs and social behavior. Although the staff indicated during focus groups that they had noticed positive changes in their students' social behavior, these perceptions did not translate into measurable shifts in teacher responses on surveys, nor were there measurable changes in students' self reports of attitudes and behaviors. However, the timing of the program – coming at the end of the school year – limited the impact that changes in staff teaching practices may have had upon students. Planned assessments of student self-reports of their attitudes and behaviors to be conducted next Fall may reveal a more substantive impact of the staff training upon students.

Observations conducted by the evaluation team, and the comments made by the staff during focus groups lead to the following recommendations for improvement of the training program and its implementation.

1. The training should be offered at the beginning of the school year rather than in the Spring as occurred in this instance.
2. The training should include follow-up classroom observations and individualized coaching to insure that staff are correctly implementing the program activities. This could potentially be accomplished by staff coordinators who received additional training as program facilitators.

3. A refresher training session should take place next Fall for the staff included in this round of training in order to insure that the program will be successfully resumed in the 2011-2012 academic year.