

Abilene Christian University

## Digital Commons @ ACU

---

Masters of Education in Teaching and Learning

Masters Theses and Projects

---

Spring 5-6-2022

### Student Perceptions of Social Emotional Learning Interventions

Courtney Cook  
cec17d@acu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/metl>



Part of the [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Cook, Courtney, "Student Perceptions of Social Emotional Learning Interventions" (2022). *Masters of Education in Teaching and Learning*. 58.

<https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/metl/58>

This Manuscript is brought to you for free and open access by the Masters Theses and Projects at Digital Commons @ ACU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters of Education in Teaching and Learning by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ ACU.

**Student Perceptions of Social Emotional Learning Interventions**

Courtney Cook

Abilene Christian University

### **Abstract**

This study examined how senior English students in an academic classroom perceived a social emotional learning curriculum called *CharacterStrong*. The researcher taught weekly *CharacterStrong* social emotional lessons focused on community building and interpersonal relationships between educators and students and among peers. She collected data through surveys, headnotes, and individual student interviews. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method to look for recurring themes. The researcher found the participants felt that the sharing prompted by *CharacterStrong* intervention resulted in higher engagement and a more cohesive classroom community. Even so, the researcher found that students had identified a lack of depth in *CharacterStrong* units that prevented them from having all social and emotional needs met.

### **Student Perceptions of Social Emotional Learning Interventions**

After being paired with a group of classmates who happened to share his birth month at the introduction of our first social emotional lesson (hereon SEL) of the school year, Terrell (all names are pseudonyms) sheepishly whispered to me, “Miss, I don’t have any friends in here, and I don’t wanna talk to people I don’t know.” It’s August 30<sup>th</sup>, and before us lies 35-some-odd weeks before Terrell will walk the stage, diploma in hand. That’s 197 friendless days he will spend in the back row of our English classroom.

I encouraged him to step outside of his comfort zone for twenty minutes. If Terrell still felt uncomfortable talking to the classmates he didn’t know after the bell rang, we would find a different arrangement for him. We went through the introductory lesson, which prompted students to share about their families, heritages, and favorite traditions or rituals. Student voices filled our classroom for the entirety of the lesson, with every student eagerly waiting to share a piece of themselves with their groups and then the whole class. Terrell was one of the most talkative, and as I circulated the room I heard him jovially describing his family’s Christmas eve tradition of movie marathons and monster cookie baking. He told me after class that it wasn’t as painful to talk to these strangers as he had expected.

Amid the general groaning that came from our seniors every time we began a new lesson (SEL or not), my cooperating teacher and I heard testimonials like Terrell’s from several other students as we continued our SEL lessons. One student even told my cooperating teacher that he was glad to be “forced to talk to people on the other side of the classroom.” These whispers of appreciation for connection and community as they were fostered by our SEL lessons piqued my interest. If students were craving community like this in our classes, as their praise suggested, I wanted to learn if and/or how our SEL curriculum was meeting that need.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to determine how students perceived SEL through the implementation of *CharacterStrong*, a SEL curriculum, in an English IV classroom. This study also sought to determine if students believed a SEL curriculum allowed them to build community with their peers and educators at the secondary level, and if so, how.

**Central Question:** What are secondary students' perceptions of the SEL curriculum, *CharacterStrong*, when it is implemented in a 12th grade English IV classroom?

**Secondary Question:** In what ways do these students believe that *CharacterStrong* allows them to reflect on their own emotional needs and build community with their peers and educators in class, if any?

This action research study took place while I was a graduate student fulfilling a year-long clinical teaching placement in a West Texas city with a population around 120,000. The Montgomery ISD school district has 16,456 enrolled students in grades K-12. My clinical teaching placement was at Austen High School, which serviced roughly 1,855 students in grades 9-12. Austen is one of two public high schools in the district. Over 50% of these students are male, and 49.9% of these students are female. Over 41% of these students are Latino/Hispanic, 36.8% are Caucasian, 14.6% are African American. Over 62% of the students at Austen High are considered at-risk, and 61.7% are considered economically disadvantaged. Over 12% receive special education accommodations, 7.3% receive gifted and talented instruction, and 3.6% are classified as English language learners.

### **Literature Review**

SEL practices have gained traction in contemporary educational practices and are now certainly a hot topic in many classrooms around the United States. But, what makes these

practices so attractive to K-12 educators? SEL curricula aim to “make the internal processes one uses to process emotions visible in order to aid in personal, academic, and social growth” (Coulter, 2021, p. 7). To achieve this lofty goal, SEL addresses five main competencies which, if mastered, will create a foundation for “high-quality relationships and social interactions” for life (Coulter, 2021, p. 7). These five competencies are as follows: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Oberle et al., 2016). Current literature and available research show that, when implemented intentionally, SEL curriculums “decreased anxiety and depression . . . improved perception of self, others, and school . . . bettered school connection . . . and [created] more positive attitudes about school” in secondary students (Coulter, 2021, p. 8). This is largely due to SEL’s recognition as a “peaceful, humanistic, and non-punitive” restorative practice that provides students with a holistic education (Dyson et al, 2021, p. 626).

Ahmed et al. (2020) researched the composition of contemporary K-12 students and the diverse needs they bring to the classroom. In decades past, students went to school to receive content knowledge solely in core subjects, but Ahmed et al. (2020) found that contemporary students have needs that extend far “beyond the mere mastery of only core subjects in schools” (p. 663). Students in the contemporary era need “support to develop . . . social-emotional competence skills” (Ahmed et al., 2020, p. 664). This is especially true of diverse and minority students. Finkey and Hayes (2020) conducted a study on SEL implementation in an urban elementary school to determine how these curricula impact the overall academic success of diverse students. They found that three factors contributed to the successful education of students with diverse needs, as follows: cultural relevance, mentorship, and student reliability. It should be noted that not all SEL programs and curriculums inherently address these factors. In

classrooms that successfully address the cultures of diverse students, introduce relatable and easily practicable lessons, and foster mentorships between teachers and students, students “will have the tools in their toolbox to deal with whatever emotion or social barrier they have” (Finkey & Hayes, 2020, p. 128). In addition to addressing the diverse needs of diverse students, SEL provides students with a holistic education that extends far beyond the core curriculum.

Ahmed et al. (2020) also found in their study that implementing lessons designed to develop students’ social and emotional literacies is necessary “for complete human development involving social interaction, effective teacher students’ relationship, [and being able to] withstand social and emotional pressure” (p. 672). Rutledge et al. (2015) furthered this understanding of SEL as necessary for complete human development by comparing the social emotional literacies of students in high- and low-performing high schools in Fort Worth, TX. These researchers found that the higher-performing high schools “successfully mobilized both the academic and social emotional systems at their schools in the service of students” (Rutledge et al., 2015, p. 1). As these researchers discussed, there is awareness in these higher-performing schools that mastering core subjects is not the sole need of contemporary students. These schools recognized that only by integrating SEL into core subjects can students experience well-rounded success.

SEL curricula also encourage students to take more responsibility for themselves and their communities. Walker and Martin (2020) believed that SEL curricula are “a model for both change and leadership” (p. 22) and that, by incorporating these curricula in their classrooms, more students will be encouraged to take on responsibility in these leadership roles. They concluded that, while SEL is an essential skill to teach adolescents, “an integrated approach and intentionally inviting mindset should be embraced” (Walker & Martin, 2020, p. 37) to fully reap

the benefits of this curriculum's focus on community and leadership development. Rutledge et al. (2015) concluded that SEL curricula allowed students to feel a stronger sense of community in their classes. Students in high-performing schools felt that "adults in the school supported them in developing both cognitive and non-cognitive skills necessary for their academic success and social wellbeing" (Rutledge et al., 2015, p. 1). As a restorative practice, SEL curricula "[focuses] on relational practices that empower students" (Dyson et al., 2021, p. 626). Nevenglosky et al. (2019) found that failing to address the social and emotional needs of developing students is a barrier to effective instruction. The relational aspect of SEL creates learning environments where students can experience support and more well-rounded academic success.

As SEL gains traction in secondary campuses, more attempts are being made at combining SEL curricula with existing core classes in an effort "to enhance its sustainability and break the perceived barrier that there is a lack of time for SEL due to the pressures of the regular classroom curriculum" (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017, p. 281). Research regarding the immersion of SEL curricula in a core subject, such as my English placement, is still in its infancy. Additionally, the majority of available literature on SEL curricula is focused on elementary classrooms (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015). However, Early et al. (2014) have published research that suggests that SEL, with a myriad of other interventions, has increased instructional effectiveness in secondary classrooms across curricula. There is still a gap in the literature that addresses the specific benefits of SEL initiatives in secondary core subject classrooms. When SEL is implemented in secondary schools, "academic achievement increases and school violence decreases," resulting in "increased high school graduation rates, postsecondary enrollment, postsecondary completion, employment rates, and average wages"

(Coulter, 2021, pp. 37-38). With this in mind, the purpose of this qualitative study was to identify senior English students' perceptions of an SEL curriculum called *CharacterStrong* being integrated in their English classroom.

### **Methods**

This action research study took place in an academic senior English classroom. Data collection methods included a survey, one-on-one interviews, and headnotes. All data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Hubbard & Power, 2003) and leveled coding (Tracy, 2013).

#### **Participant Selection**

Participants were selected from our sixth class period of senior English IV containing 26 students. At Austen High School, SEL *CharacterStrong* lessons are only taught during sixth period. All students were solicited to participate in this study. An informational letter was sent home to all parents or guardians with an attached consent form. The twelve students who received parental permission then completed an assent form to participate in the study while in class. Six participants were male and six were female. Six participants were Caucasian, three were Latino/Hispanic, two were African American, and one was bi-racial.

#### **Data Collection**

This action research project relied on surveys, headnote observations (Hendricks, 2017), and individual interviews as sources of data collection. The survey (see Appendix A) was developed to determine students' emotions regarding our SEL curriculum and their successes both personally and in community. All participants participated in the survey process. The survey contained eight Likert scale questions and two short-answer questions. The results of the survey were analyzed to determine a purposive sample (Patton, 1990) of three different groups:

students with high perceptions of *CharacterStrong*, students with mid-level perceptions of *CharacterStrong*, and students with low perceptions of *CharacterStrong*.

Data was collected throughout the four-week study over *CharacterStrong* using headnote observations (Hendricks, 2017). Once a week for four weeks, I taught a twenty-minute *CharacterStrong* lesson. All participants took part in the lesson. I recorded my observations in bulleted headnotes (Hendricks, 2017) of students' comments on their own social and emotional growth during the lesson, especially as it related to community. I fleshed out these observations at the end of the school day after giving the lesson and two to four days after the lesson.

During the last two weeks of data collection, I conducted six to eight individual interviews with a purposive sample (Patton, 1990) of students, as determined by the initial survey. The interviews were fifteen to twenty minutes long, audio recorded on two devices, and transcribed. To conduct these interviews, I used a semi-structured frame in which I ask pre-planned, open-ended questions which often led to additional comments and questions as determined by participant responses (Hendricks, 2017).

### **Data Analysis**

As qualitative data were collected and transcribed, I analyzed them using the constant comparative method (Hubbard & Power, 2003). This process requires the continual checking and analyzing of codes assigned to qualitative data to find areas for new coding or further exploration. Coded qualitative data included short-answer questions from the surveys, fleshed out headnotes, and individual interview transcriptions. To code data, I first generated level 1 codes, which describe the substance of the data, from the first 20% of collected data (Tracy, 2013). After generating these ten to fifteen level 1 codes, I used them to analyze the remaining 80% of data. Once done analyzing all level 1 codes created for data, I synthesized the codes to

create three to five level 2 codes (Tracy, 2013). These level 2 codes gave on overarching synthesis of the level 1 codes. As I was coding, I created and updated a running index of my codes on Google docs (Hubbard & Power, 2003). In this index I wrote memos for all of my level 2 codes in which the code was described and the significance of the code was listed to generate a deeper understanding of the data I had collected and coded (Tracy, 2013). Lastly, I created a codebook (see Appendix B) with definitions and examples of the level 1 and 2 codes I created while analyzing the qualitative data I collected (Tracy, 2013).

To analyze the quantitative data, I used descriptive statistics to evaluate the Likert scale questions from the survey. I created a column chart for each Likert scale question and recorded each participant's responses to each question on the survey (see Figure 1).

### **Findings**

The following section discusses my findings after analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data that was collected over the course of this two-week study. The quantitative data provided by the introductory *CharacterStrong* survey revealed student perceptions of different aspects of our *CharacterStrong* uniting. Analysis of the data revealed four major findings that supplemented the one-on-one student interviews that followed the survey. These findings include the following: Students felt a strong sense of community in our classroom, were able to realize their emotional needs and develop friendships as a result of our *CharacterStrong* units, but still felt they lacked the necessary skills to express their emotions effectively or be respected by their peers. To visually present my findings, I utilized bar graphs and poetic transcriptions (Glesne, 1997). I used student quotes from the short answer questions on the surveys and one-on-one interviews (see Appendix C) to illustrate students' perceptions about their social emotional needs as addressed by *CharacterStrong*.

### Quantitative Findings

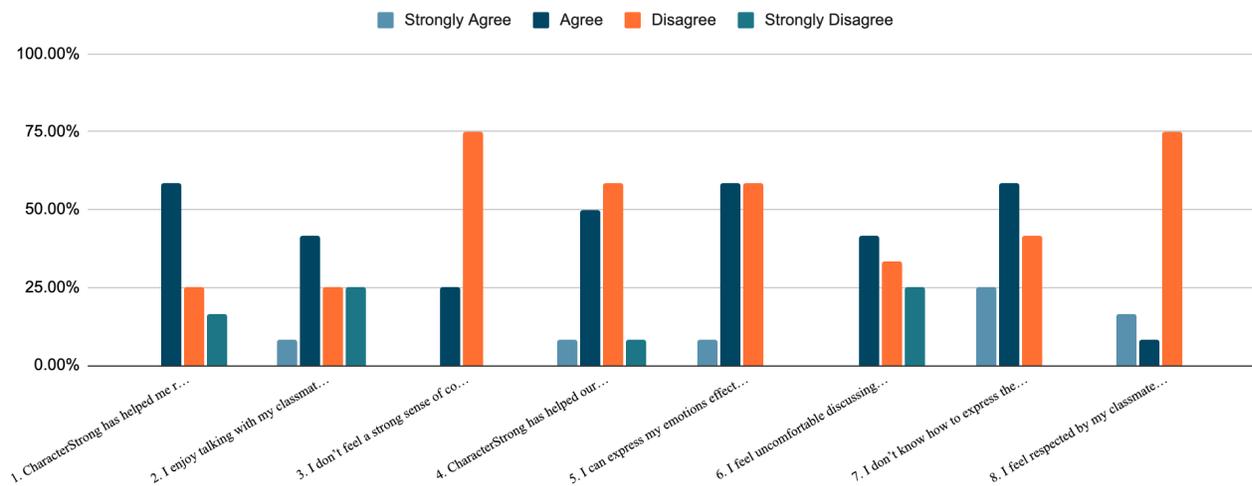
“When we do a *CharacterStrong* unit, I feel... like it’s a good day in class.”

“When we do a *CharacterStrong* unit, I feel... like people open up.”

“The community in this classroom is.... good and growing because of *CharacterStrong*; It is helping.”

“The community in this classroom is.... goofy, loving, and caring.”

These quotes represent a smattering of student answers to the survey short-answer questions “When we do a *CharacterStrong* unit, I feel...” and “...The community in this classroom is....”. As is reflected in students’ answers to the Likert-scale questions included in the introductory survey (see Figure 1), students overall noticed a positive impact on our classroom community and their ability to open up to their peers in class as a result of our *CharacterStrong* units. Figure 1 represents the percentage of students’ answers to the eight Likert scale questions included in the introductory survey. Data from the introductory survey were used to group students by their perception levels to three main categories, as follows: class culture, *CharacterStrong* addressing emotional needs, and sharing life, experiences, and opinions with peers. Of the twelve consenting and assenting students who participated in this study, nine students had a positive perception of class culture, three had a negative perception of class culture, seven had positive perceptions of *CharacterStrong* addressing emotional needs, five had a negative perception of *CharacterStrong* addressing emotional needs, five had positive perceptions of sharing life, experiences, and opinions with peers, and seven had negative perceptions of sharing life, experiences, and opinions with peers.

**Figure 1***All Participants' Responses to the CharacterStrong Survey*

*Note.* This figure shows all participants' survey responses to all Likert scale question included on the *CharacterStrong* survey.

### Qualitative Findings

The data for these qualitative findings come from both one-on-one interviews with five consenting students and my own field notes taken during and directly after each *CharacterStrong* unit we engaged in as a class during this study. Analysis of this data revealed four major themes, as follows: *CharacterStrong* creates opportunities for student leadership and high student engagement, *CharacterStrong* encourages sharing, even outside of one's comfort zone, for the best, *CharacterStrong* creates a more cohesive classroom culture between both peers and teachers, and *CharacterStrong* lacks the ability to make a lasting impact on emotions and emotional expressions. These themes will be explored in greater detail below, utilizing both narrative explanation and poetic transcriptions. Poetic transcriptions are a form of found poetry in which the researcher uses the words of participants to convey key findings from qualitative data (Glesne, 1997). For each poetic transcription, I used student quotes from our one-on-one

interviews to create poetry that personified students' perceptions about making mistakes. One poetic transcription was created for each of the four major findings.

***CharacterStrong Creates Opportunities for Student Leadership and High Student Engagement***

Student Initiative

I mean, it just depends what mood you're in,  
sometimes you don't really feel like talking  
about your feelings, so it can be

a

*waste*

of

time

cause if you don't feel like doing something  
you're not going to get anything out of it.

But if you really want to get something out of it,

you

*will*

get

something

out

of

it.

This poetic transcription is taken almost verbatim from my one-on-one interview with Terrell. In his interview, he expressed some frustration that his classmates would sometimes not take our *CharacterStrong* units seriously and deem them a “waste of time.” He later admitted that he might also not take our *CharacterStrong* units as seriously as he should all the time, but he recognized that when he put forth the effort, he was able to leave class with meaningful takeaways that applied to his life both in and out of the classroom. Other student participants in this study indicated that *CharacterStrong* was a positive force in shaping our classroom because it helped them connect with and understand their peers, exercise autonomy over classroom discussion, and provided a light break from heavier intellectual instruction.

Students discussed how *CharacterStrong* helped them create authentic connections with their peers through personal and group reflections of their thoughts and feelings on broad social topics. This is exemplified in King's interview, where he reflected on *CharacterStrong* by saying the following: "I guess like when we do *CharacterStrong*, it makes you actually think about yourself and sometimes it's like people don't, like, normally don't do that, you know?" Several students indicated that, as a result of our *CharacterStrong* units, they had developed new friendships with peers that have flourished outside of our classroom. Interviews with students and my own observations also revealed that students felt they had tapped into an avenue for emotional expression that was beneficial for themselves and for their connections to peers. In my interview with Allison, she mentioned that a chance pairing led to the development of a deep friendship with one of her classmates. By splitting up into groups, she "built a relationship with Matthew, like [she] and [he] talk as friends now because of it, even though we weren't friends before, and now we communicate and message all the time."

As a result of the friendships created and the constant opportunities to learn and engage with peers, students experienced opportunities to be both engaged and to lead discussions and initiative conversations within our *CharacterStrong* units. The prompts that *CharacterStrong* asked students to reflect on and discuss with their peers created opportunities to share that sometimes made students uncomfortable but ultimately helped them

### ***CharacterStrong Encourages Sharing, Even Outside of One's Comfort Zone, for the Best***

#### **I Learned**

It taught me how to handle emotions  
and how to feel.

I learned I could probably handle things differently

I learned that I revert to anger  
and *CharacterStrong* has taught me to calm down  
instead of escalating things to violence.

I learned not to argue so much  
I learned to just keep my distance  
I learned not to just continually put fuel on the fire.

I learned to listen and to be a friend.

This poetic transcription was assembled from snippets of Allison's one-on-one interview. In this interview, she enthusiastically explained how *CharacterStrong* had helped her become a better friend and daughter because she was learning to address her emotional needs during these lessons. Although she indicated on her introduction survey that she did not feel comfortable sharing her life and experiences with her peers because "that's just [her] problem. [She doesn't] think [she] should make it anybody else's problem," she felt that *CharacterStrong* helped her share more of her personal burdens with trusted peers and teachers. Several other students indicated that, because of the thought-provoking prompts for much of our class discussion time, *CharacterStrong* provided a depth of emotional introspection that encouraged them to share in small and large group discussion formats in ways that gave them a new perspective on themselves.

The suggestion that *CharacterStrong* helps students confront their opinions and emotions in meaningful ways is also echoed in my interview with King. He says that he enjoys our *CharacterStrong* units because "when we do *CharacterStrong*, it makes [him] actually think about [himself] and sometimes it's like people don't normally don't do that, you know?" While he and several of his other peers admitted that they enjoyed the introspective nature of our *CharacterStrong* units, he was not alone in feeling reluctant to share these enlightenments with

his peers. Included below is a poetic transcription of King's wrestling with his discomfort in sharing his personal life and experiences with his peers.

### A Personal Person

I've never been like a full on  
*personal person*.

That's just a me thing.

I will talk to my classmates,  
but I never get personal.

To feel comfortable

I have to *know* someone

Like *really know* someone

for a while,

so I know for a fact I can trust them.

Although King initially found it difficult to feel comfortable sharing with his classmates, his personal takeaways and the connections he built with his peers made the practice worthwhile. This was the case for several students. When personal sharing did happen, as all interviewed students admitted did happen from time to time in our CharacterStrong units, students gradually became more comfortable in this sharing and were able to use these interpersonal connections to better understand themselves and their roles in the classroom community. This theme is explored in greater depth in the following section.

### ***CharacterStrong Creates a More Cohesive Classroom Culture Between both Peers and Teachers***

#### What is Respect?

There's a difference between *respecting*  
and *understanding* somebody.

Understanding means you can see them  
And where they're coming from

It's not even necessarily

About respect or understanding,  
It just happens. It's human nature, I guess.

The poetic transcription above is taken from a combination of Terrell and Kings' one-on-one interviews, in which they each discussed how respect for their peers or lack thereof plays a role in their comfort in the class, both while we engage in *CharacterStrong* lessons and when we engage in our English curriculum. They both were drawn to the difference between understanding their peers and respecting their peers, especially Terrell, as he realized that being able to understand his peers and relate to them did not necessarily mean he respected the decisions they made. He claimed that, prior to our *CharacterStrong* units, he wasn't presented with as many opportunities to understand his peers' perspectives. With this understanding, which often asked students to connect emotionally as explored in the previous theme, came more respect among peers than students like King and Terrell had experienced prior to our time with *CharacterStrong*. Consider the following anecdote Terrell offered during our interview of proof of the respect *CharacterStrong* encouraged among peers:

"I learned about peoples' music tastes [in one of our units]. Matthew said he likes rock. Most people like rap, but he's not just, you know, worried about how everybody thinks about him. He actually just enjoys what he enjoys without peer pressure."

Although a rather surface-level question, the respect for his peer, Matthew, is evident in the way Terrell praises him for staying true to himself and his interests. Because of *CharacterStrong*, there were many instances like this occurring in our classroom.

Surveyed and interviewed students defined their perceptions of factors that lead to a positive classroom community and indicated that *CharacterStrong* created a positive classroom culture because they were given the opportunity to express their emotions without judgment from their peers. Students were prompted to define classroom community, which many decided

was a classroom environment in which people felt respected, comfortable talking to peers, listened to, and relatively safe from rejection or judgment. After providing this definition, interviewed students provided examples of the ways they had respected their peers and how their peers had respected them and their unique perspectives. Students also indicated that the opportunity to discuss the details of their peers' lives, as CharacterStrong often emphasized, also made it easier for them to respect and appreciate their peers.

Students were also asked about how the educators leading CharacterStrong units contributed to the classroom culture, to which most interviewed students agreed that teacher facilitation helped them feel closer to their teachers, understand their teachers better, and increased their engagement in both CharacterStrong and class instruction as a whole. Mary discussed how my cooperating teacher and I used our unique teaching styles to tailor the *CharacterStrong* units to our unique taste, saying "y'all have different kinds of teaching styles, and I think the variety is kind of good." In her interview, Hannah explained that "sometimes [we] just let [the students] be" without "trying to contain [them]," which she felt allowed them to better communicate with their peers and feel more comfortable sharing with teachers than they might have in other classrooms.

### ***CharacterStrong Lacks the Ability to Make a Lasting Impact on Classroom Community***

#### What is Community?

Community is this strong bond  
With everybody coming together  
And understanding each other.

People are respectful to each other,  
people listen and talk to each other.

People *know* each other and are respectful,  
Staying positive and encouraging the whole group.

In a strong community,  
There's a sense of brotherhood  
And your classmates become your fellow man.

The poetic transcription above is a smorgasbord of definitions of community from all interviewed participants in this study. Each student was asked to describe a strong, cohesive, and successful community. Although students felt that *CharacterStrong* created a generally more cohesive community, there was conflicting data discussing how successful *CharacterStrong* was in creating the respectful community that all students identified in their interviews. Several students suggested in their interviews that, in spite of *CharacterStrong* units focused on building respect and establishing boundaries, our class culture lacked the necessary boundaries to create a respect community in which all students are heard and understood. Mary was especially vocal about this deficit in our classroom culture, saying that she wished we had established and maintained boundaries that encouraged “everyone [to listen and get] the chance to be heard.” Instead, she felt that our *CharacterStrong* units were not as successful as they could have been because “people in class just talk all the time” and she doesn’t “feel like [she’s] being heard.” She found herself often feeling frustrated because “people just don’t listen to each other,” and she wondered “How [she could] form friendships with people if they don’t want to listen...about anything.”

In addition to some frustration about a lack of respect in our class community, several students in both surveys and interviews indicated that *CharacterStrong* has weaknesses and is not able to prompt students to go deep enough or work respectfully enough to establish positive friendships in the classroom. Students described the deficiencies and shortcomings of *CharacterStrong*, noting especially that, as seniors in high school, they felt the *CharacterStrong* prompts and materials too elementary and basic to truly inspire deeper reflections of emotional

needs. Terrell noted that *CharacterStrong* units might be helpful to people who have not experienced difficult things or had to confront difficult emotions, but because he had worked through these emotions during his earlier years of high school, he felt there was little value in *CharacterStrong*'s prompts for emotional reflection.

The same was true for several interviewed students when asking about connecting with peers and creating friendships as a result of *CharacterStrong*. Hannah in particular indicated that *CharacterStrong* was too surface level to inspire deep connections between herself and her peers, noting that "the type of people who are in our class tend to develop friendships during just normal lessons." There were several instances where students suggested that *CharacterStrong* was not deep enough to allow students to create long lasting connections.

### **Implications for Teachers**

The purpose of this study was to explore senior English IV students' perceptions of the implementation of our SEL curriculum, *CharacterStrong*, and to determine what impact, if any, students found this curriculum had on the classroom community. This study began with an introductory survey that asked students to answer eight Likert-scale questions and two short answer questions with sentence stems regarding their baseline perceptions of *CharacterStrong* and its impact on their social and emotional development and on the classroom community. The survey that provided specific insight into my students' perceptions of *CharacterStrong*, both positive and negative. After the survey, I wrote observational notes recording the events of each *CharacterStrong* lesson we practiced during this study. I noticed that the classroom community of this class period, which was the only class of our six classes that received *CharacterStrong* intervention, was often collaborative and eager to share answers to prompts of all varieties, from the silly to the emotional. I also created a purposive sample of students that were selected from

the results of their introductory survey (Patton, 1990). Three interviewed students indicated positive perceptions of *CharacterStrong* and two interviewed students indicated negative perceptions of *CharacterStrong*. A third student with negative perceptions of *CharacterStrong* was asked to participate in an interview but was unable to do so due to repeated scheduling conflicts.

Throughout this study, I watched *CharacterStrong* open the door to vulnerable and emotionally-rich discussions throughout our classroom. The emphasis on peer-to-peer sharing on meaningful topics, such as how to leave a legacy at Austen High before graduation, allowed students to make deep connections with their own emotional states and needs and share these newfound understandings with their peers. Often, when students listened to the stories of their peers, they felt safe to open up. This study taught my students that to engage in introspective exercises that allow them to better understand and respect themselves and those around them. They also learned to understand the unique perspectives their peers brought to the classroom and respect those perspectives as valid. I believe this study taught my students the importance and value of their feelings and the feelings of those around them. Sharing with peers empowered students and provided them with the opportunity to realize that their thoughts are worthy of being heard. It showed them the strength that comes from their feelings, voice, and their vulnerability.

For teachers wanting to implement this intervention into their classrooms, I suggest gradually building up students' stamina for emotional connection and introspective reflection. *CharacterStrong* can certainly be crammed into a twenty-minute time-slot once a week, but it is often emotionally draining for students and leaves students with fewer opportunities to truly discuss and engage with their peers. By establishing a routine of just five to ten minutes of

instructional time every day for *CharacterStrong*, students are able to engage in short bursts of conversation with their peers that continue throughout the week and allow students to dig deeper than they would be able to do in one sitting. When I began this study, I only implemented *CharacterStrong* into one class period of the week, which created students who were restless and weary by the end of our twenty-minute unit. By splitting it up into a three-day period, students were less restless and more prepared to have meaningful conversations with their peers.

The research questions of this study were answered in full; however, I am left wondering about further areas of research. What other aspects of personal growth and development does *CharacterStrong* inspire? This study looked specifically at how *CharacterStrong* was perceived by students and how it might have impacted the classroom community, but there is certainly room for more research to be conducted about the impact *CharacterStrong* might have on encouraging students to enter into leadership roles, work within their school community, etc.

This study has heavily impacted my teaching practices. Even if I teach in a school without *CharacterStrong* curriculum on hand, I will continue to implement discussion prompts that encourage students to introspectively reflect on themselves and perspectives and share deeply with their peers. I will incorporate what I have learned from this study for years to come.

## References

- Ahmed, I., Hamzah, A. B., & Abdullah, M. N. L. Y. B. (2020). Effect of social and emotional learning approach on students' social-emotional competence. *International Journal of Instruction, 13*(4), 663–676. <https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2020.13441a>
- Coulter, K. M. (2021). *Social emotional learning incorporation in former county level high school teacher of the year's classrooms: A qualitative study* (Publication No 28095330) [Doctoral dissertation, Brandman University]. ProQuest Information & Learning.
- Diane M. Early, Ronald D. Rogge, & Edward L. Deci. (2014). Engagement, alignment, and rigor as vital signs of high-quality instruction: A classroom visit protocol for instructional improvement and research. *The High School Journal, 97*(4), 219–239. <https://www-jstor-org.acu.idm.oclc.org/stable/43281032>
- Dyson, B., Howley, D., Shen, Y., & Baek, S. (2021). Educators' experiences of establishing social and emotional learning pedagogies in an elementary school with at-risk students. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education, 13*(5), 625–638. <https://doi.org/10.26822/iejee.2021.217>
- Finkey, C .N., & Hayes, M. B. (2020). *Educator perspectives on the most useful strategies for minority students in acquiring social-emotional learning skills in an urban school setting: A descriptive qualitative study* (Publication No. 28260115) [Doctoral dissertation, Samford University]. ProQuest Information & Learning.
- Glesne, C, (1997). That rare feeling: Re-presenting research through poetic transcription. *Qualitative Inquiry, 3*(1), 202-221.
- Hamedani, M. G., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2015). Social emotional learning in high school:

How three urban high schools engage, educate, and empower youth. *Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education*, 1-15. <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/>

Hendricks, C. (2017). *Improving schools through action research: A reflective practice approach* (4th ed.). Pearson.

Hubbard, R. S., & Power B. M. (2003). *The art of classroom inquiry: A handbook for teacher-researchers* (Rev. ed). Heinemann.

Nevenglosky, E. A., Cale, C., & Aguilar, S. P. (2019). Barriers to effective curriculum implementation. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 36.

Oberle, E., Domitrovich, C. E., Meyers, D. C., & Weissberg, R. P. (2016). Establishing systemic social and emotional learning approaches in schools: A framework for schoolwide implementation. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 46(3), 277–297.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2015.1125450>

Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

Rutledge, S. A., Cohen-Vogel, L., Osborne-Lampkin, L., & Roberts, R. L. (2015). Understanding effective high schools: Evidence for personalization for academic and social emotional learning. *American Educational Research Journal*, 52(6), 1060–1092.

Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Walker, T. R., & Martin, B. N. (2020). Inviting success when implementing social emotional learning into secondary suburban classrooms. *Journal of Invitational Theory and Practice*, 26, 21–40.

## Appendix A

### *CharacterStrong* Survey

For each of the questions below, circle the response that best describes how you feel about the statement, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree.

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. CharacterStrong has helped me realize my emotional needs	1	2	3	4
2. I enjoy talking with my classmates about my life and experiences	1	2	3	4
3. I don't feel a strong sense of community with my classmates	1	2	3	4
4. CharacterStrong has helped our class develop friendships	1	2	3	4
5. I can express my emotions effectively and respectfully	1	2	3	4
6. I feel uncomfortable discussing my feelings about important social topics with my classmates	1	2	3	4
7. I don't know how to express the emotions I'm feeling with my peers	1	2	3	4
8. I feel respected by my classmates because of the boundaries we've created together through CharacterStrong	1	2	3	4

**Complete the following sentences in your own words:**

1. When we do a *CharacterStrong* unit in class, I feel...

2. The community in this classroom is....

## Appendix B

## Codebook

Level	Name	Definition	Example
I	CharacterStrong inspires emotional introspection and personal understanding	Students indicated that CharacterStrong has helped them better understand their emotions, dreams, and desires	<p>– Uh, how do I say it, like I guess like when we do CharacterStrong, it makes you like actually think about yourself and sometimes it's like people don't, like, normally don't do that, you know? (King interview)</p>
I	Lacks depth to inspire emotional introspection	Students indicated that CharacterStrong did not prompt them to go deep enough to realize their emotions	<p>– You talk here in your survey about how you don't agree that CharacterStrong has helped you realize your emotional needs and you feel like you don't know how to express your emotions with your peers.</p> <p>– Well I feel like we haven't gone into enough depth to really, like, emotionally connect with everybody around us. (Terrell interview)</p>
I	CharacterStrong helped us make connections to the people in class	Students indicated that CharacterStrong helped them form relationships of depth and substance with their classmates	<p>– C: but then when we go down here in the survey, you say that the community in this classroom is fun or wild. So, can you talk to me more about the answer. . . Tell me how you feel about the community in this classroom.</p> <p>Um, well I guess when I say like fun and wild, I guess like the classroom environment is like fun, like</p>

			<p>people in the class are fun . . .          . *laughs*</p> <p>C: Like funny?</p> <p>K: No, I wouldn't say . . .          Well, I guess funny, too, but not just funny, like people make me feel comfortable in the classroom environment. It doesn't make you feel left out or anything. (King interview)</p>
I	CharacterStrong makes me think deeply about thought-provoking topics	Students indicated that CharacterStrong asked thought-provoking questions that required a depth of reflection for themselves and their peers	<p>– K: Because it made me think about what I was actually passionate about. Like before, I wasn't—I hadn't ever really given it any thought. I hadn't thought about what I really wanted to do.</p> <p>C: Really! So this was your first time to think through what you're passionate about?</p> <p>K: Well I guess.</p> <p>C: Do you remember what your answer was to that question?</p> <p>K: Uh, I think I said art. Yeah, I said art. (King interview)</p>
I	Characterstrong is an opportunity for a brain break	Students indicated that CharacterStrong was enjoyable because it was an opportunity to work on lighter, more fun material	<p>– C: You say you feel like it's a free day on your survey.</p> <p>T: Well, compared to what we usually do, poems and other stuff like that, it's not so much of a hassle, I guess.</p>

			<p>C: Not a hassle? Do you . . . Is that a good thing?</p> <p>T: Um, in a way it is (Terrell interview)</p>
I	CharacterStrong helps our class develop respect between classmates	Students defined how they interpret respect and explained how CharacterStrong has helped them apply this definition in our class discussions	<p>– C: Well what does . . . tell me about respect. What does respect mean to you?</p> <p>A: Mmm, I don't know. You have to give it to get it, honestly. Like if you're really disrespectful to me in the beginning I don't think I'm going to respect you back. Like if you're rude to me and you're ugly, I don't think I'm going to like you after that.</p> <p>C: Ok, so describe the respect of lack of respect you find in our sixth period class.</p> <p>A: I don't know I think we're pretty respectful of each other's feelings and stuff. Like I don't think anybody judges and all that in there. Like I feel like our class is pretty healthy.</p>
I	Our classroom community needs work to be more respectful	Students indicated that even with CharacterStrong's emphasis on respect, the class culture is not often respectful	<p>M: Um. I don't know, I'm not sure why I put that. Um. I guess because like nobody ever listens to what's actually going on so like you're just sitting there. Like you, Miss C, you're just talking and like I'm listening but not everybody is listening so it gets kind of boring or just listen to like</p>

			one person. (Mary interview)
I	Sharing deeply with peers is easier when I know my group members well	Students indicated that discussing deep, thought-provoking, or person questions was easier when paired with group members they knew well	<p>– T: I do like with surface level stuff, I don't, I don't really . . .</p> <p>C: Are there certain people in the class you would feel more comfortable talking to than others?</p> <p>T: Uh, probably, yeah, people I've known longer or just people I know better, so . . . (Terrell interview)</p>
I	What does community even mean?	Students offered their definitions of community in a classroom and provided examples of both positive and negative communities	<p>What is the community—first of all, what does community mean to you?</p> <p>K: It's just people being respectful to each other, people listening, talking to each other, so forth. (King interview)</p> <p>– C: So what makes it a good community?</p> <p>K: Just everyone talking to each other, even if you don't know someone, you still feel comfortable talking to them. Like, last week there was a new kid who came from Utah, and like we automatically started talking to him and made him feel comfortable so he wouldn't be shy or whatever. (King interview)</p>
I	CharacterStrong has not helped us establish friendships or community	Students indicated that CharacterStrong in and of itself was not deep enough to help students develop or maintain	C: Um, number four; CharacterStrong has helped our class develop

		friendships	<p>friendships, and you disagreed. Walk me through what you were thinking with that.</p> <p>H: Hmm, I don't think CharacterStrong helped us much, but just because of the type of people who are in our class, we tend to develop friendships during like just normal lessons. (Hannah interview)</p>
I	Sharing with peers during CharacterStrong about my life and experiences makes me uncomfortable	Students indicated that sharing about their personal experiences was uncomfortable because it was too personal to discuss with classmates who don't know their whole background	<p>-I don't know how to express the emotions I'm feeling with my peers and you said agree. So again, how is that different from I enjoy talking with my classmates about my life and not emotions?</p> <p>M: Because like emotions are like harder to talk to people about. (Mary interview)</p> <p>- A: I feel like my problems just belong to me, I don't know.</p>
I	Sharing my feelings with my peers feels natural	Students indicated that sharing about either themselves/their lives and experiences was natural to them or they were not concerned that peers would judge their stances on social issues	<p>C: I enjoy talking with my classmates about my life and experiences, and you say strongly agree, strongly. Ok, tell me what's going through your brain.</p> <p>T: I just like to talk, that's it.</p> <p>C: Well what about, what do you think of when you hear "life and experiences?"</p> <p>T: Well, sometimes it's just</p>

			<p>fun to tell a good story, you know, get close to people if you like them or want the opportunity to get close with somebody. (Terrell interview)</p>
I	<p>Sharing with peers during CharacterStrong about social issues makes me uncomfortable</p>	<p>Students indicated that they were worried their peers would judge them for the positions they took on different social issues</p>	<p>C: Ok. Awesome. "I feel uncomfortable discussing my feelings about important social topics with my classmates." You also said strongly agree here. So what's the difference between this and sharing your life experiences?</p> <p>T: I feel like social topics . . . experiences in my life is personal and stuff like that, I can share that because that's me, I can't say opinions and other things that may cause controversy. I don't feel like my person life causes a lot of controversy, so. . .</p> <p>T: Like, you can talk about anything from rights to you know just what's going on in the world, and I feel like that gets really controversial in a classroom and it causes a lot of unnecessary hate for something that's just a little opinion that has no value in everyday life. (Terrell interview)</p>
I	<p>Student initiative makes or breaks CharacterStrong's success</p>	<p>Students indicated that CharacterStrong can only be successful when students/their peers buy into the questions and give it their all</p>	<p>– T: I mean, it just depends what mood you're in, because sometimes you're not really in a . . . you don't really feel like talking about your feelings so it can be a waste of time cause no</p>

			<p>matter—if you don't feel like doing something you're not going to get anything out of it. But if you're like . . . if you really want to get something out of it, you will get something out of it.</p>
I	<p>CharacterStrong helps me express my emotional needs</p>	<p>Students indicate that CharacterStrong has helped them better express their emotions, dreams, and desires to their peers, friends, and families</p>	<p>– I don't know how to express the emotions I'm feeling with peers. Ok, you said that you agree that you don't know how to express the emotions you're feeling. What does that mean to you? To express the emotions you're feeling.</p> <p>K: Uhh, like if I'm in a bad mood or whatever, I don't like to show it. I don't like to show that I'm in a bad mood.</p> <p>C: Ok, so how would you act if you're in a bad mood?</p> <p>K: Uh, I'll try to act the same as I would any other day. Like I said, I don't like to get personal or whatever because people ask "What's wrong?" And I don't feel like talking about what happened. (King interview)</p>
I	<p>How I feel during the day impacts how much I engage with my classes and classmates</p>	<p>Students indicated that the success of CharacterStrong depends mostly on the emotional states of students in the class on any given day</p>	<p>– K: Well I guess that if you're in a good mood then you want to like engage in a classroom, do good, like you wanna get the assignment done. But like if you're not, or maybe you're in a bad mood, whatever, then you just like wouldn't care.</p>

I	Teacher facilitation makes our classroom community flow	Students indicated that teachers are a necessary component of encouraging emotional introspection and facilitating positive student interactions	<p>A: Um, I don't know. Like I just feel more comfortable in this class than all my other ones.</p> <p>C: Is there a specific reason why?</p> <p>A: I don't know, you and Mrs. Anderson are just comforting. Like, y'all are really nice and I feel like y'all don't judge at all. So I mean.</p>
II	CharacterStrong creates opportunities for student leadership and high student engagement	Students indicated that CharacterStrong is a positive force in our classroom because it helps them connect with and understand their peers, exercise autonomy over classroom discussion, and provides a light break from heavier intellectual instruction.	<p>CharacterStrong helped us make connections to the people in class</p> <p>Characterstrong is an opportunity for a brain break</p> <p>Student initiative makes or breaks CharacterStrong's success</p>
II	CharacterStrong encourages sharing, even outside of one's comfort zone, for the best	Students indicated that, with thought-provoking prompts, CharacterStrong provides a depth of emotional introspection that encourages students to share in small and large group discussion formats in ways that gives them new perspective on themselves.	<p>CharacterStrong inspires emotional introspection and personal understanding</p> <p>CharacterStrong makes me think deeply about thought-provoking topics</p> <p>Sharing deeply with peers is easier when I know my group members well</p> <p>Sharing with peers during CharacterStrong about my life and experiences makes me uncomfortable</p> <p>Sharing my feelings with my peers feels natural</p> <p>Sharing with peers during CharacterStrong about social</p>

			<p>issues makes me uncomfortable</p> <p>How I feel during the day impacts how I much I engage with my classes and classmates</p>
II	CharacterStrong creates a more cohesive classroom culture between both peers and teachers	By defining a positive classroom community, Students indicated that CharacterStrong creates a positive classroom culture because they are given the opportunity to express their emotions without judgment with their peers.	<p>CharacterStrong helps our class develop respect between classmates</p> <p>What does community even mean?</p> <p>CharacterStrong helps me understand and express my emotional needs</p> <p>Teacher facilitation makes our classroom community flow</p>
II	CharacterStrong lacks the ability to make a lasting impact on emotions and emotional expressions	Students indicated that CharacterStrong has weaknesses and is not able to prompt students to go deep enough or work respectfully enough to establish positive friendships in the classroom.	<p>Lacks depth to meet emotional needs</p> <p>Our classroom community needs work to be more respectful</p> <p>CharacterStrong has not helped us establish friendships or community</p>

## Appendix C

### One-on-One Student Interview Protocol

1. Walk me through how you feel when you hear we'll be doing a CharacterStrong unit.
2. Tell me about a CharacterStrong unit that sticks out to you. What do you remember? Why do you think this one comes to mind?
3. Tell me about something you've learned about yourself through one of our CharacterStrong lessons.
4. Tell me about something you've learned about one of your classmates through one of our CharacterStrong lessons.
5. How does CharacterStrong impact the way you view your peers?
6. Describe the classroom community. What boundaries have been established because of CharacterStrong?
7. What role do your teachers, Mrs. Oglesby and I, play in creating classroom community?
8. Give an example of the way community has been impacted, positively or negatively, by our CharacterStrong units.
9. How do you see your emotions influencing your work in school?
10. Tell me about a good day/bad day?  
What factors contribute to you having a good day/bad day?

Questions may vary and additional questions may be asked depending on the answers of the participants.