MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON CONTROVERSIAL QUESTIONS:
A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH USING VIGNETTES TO DISCOVER
TEACHERS' REASONS FOR THEIR RESPONSES

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Middle School Teacher Perspectives on Controversial Questions:
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This dissertation focused on teachers’ reasons of why they were willing or reluctant to have discussions of a controversial nature. This dissertation used vignettes in an emergent grounded theory approach. Interviews and focus groups consisted of eight male and 27 female middle school teachers in central Ohio. A division of teachers into two groups of willing and reluctant revealed numerous findings. Willing teachers employed teachable moments through educationally relevant discussions and understood adolescents’ struggles through moral development. Reluctant teachers resented the lack of teaching time or were uncomfortable with controversial discussions in their classrooms. The results of this research recommended that teacher education programs provide additional information about moral developmental of middle school students.
To my parents, Martha L. Jones and the late Robert A. Jones, your confidence in me made all
the difference.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Student attitudes, student self-concepts, opportunities for young people to dialogue about current social issues…need to be given more direct attention in the middle school. So too are a greater concern for process, for full discussion of real issues…that carry over into high school and life. These kinds of things may need to be given greater attention, even at the expense of covering some textbook content. (Lounsbury, 1984, pp. 25-26)

The goal of this research was to conduct a grounded theory investigation into teachers’ reactions and responses to students’ controversial questions in the classroom. The research took into account the roles and relationships between middle school teachers and students in regard to classroom talk, as well as the climate of the classroom and the culture of the school. The first chapter of this dissertation includes the background of the study, the statement of the problem, the significance of the problem, and a summary of the methodology used in the study.

Background of Study

How teachers react and respond to students’ questions is critical in the development of students as lifelong learners. Classroom talk is important because it establishes the roles of the teacher and students in the classroom and it can encourage deeper understandings, hence, increased learning. These roles and relationships between teachers and students in a middle school classroom can also affect students’ self-worth, confidence, and desire to learn more (Davis, 2003). Barnes (1976/1992) claimed that the rules and regulations of communication in a classroom determine the roles students are permitted to play in that classroom and ultimately the kinds of learning that the students will experience.
In 1983, the leaders of sociocultural teaching and learning research believed that despite years of research into the nature and impact of relationships between students and teachers there was still much to be done (Minuchin & Shapiro, 1983; Weinstien, 1983). Specific research on frequency and types of student-teacher interactions that influence the quality of relationships, most notably the use of physical space, expectations of student accomplishments, and teachers’ attitudes and behaviors, still left researchers searching for conclusive answers to their questions (Minuchin & Shapiro, 1983). By 1997, this research was building again as Pianta (1997) coined the term *affordance value*, meaning the extent that adults offer the student resources to support his or her intellectual, social, and emotional development that otherwise would not have been available. Furthermore, considering the amount of time students attend school, supportive adult relationships within the school setting are significant to a student’s development (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Davis, 2003; Hartup, 1989; Pianta 1997, 1999). Student-teacher relationships can contribute to students’ sense of values (Brophy, 1998; Brophy & Kherr, 1985; Oldfather & Dahl, 1994), their need to belong (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b; Noddings, 1988; Wentzel, 1997, 1998), and help students cope with the roller coaster that is their social life (Alderman, 1999; Wentzel, 1993a, 1993b). Finally, because of teachers’ previous experience through their own adolescences, they bring emotional, behavioral, and academic skills to the students (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Pianta, 1997, 1999; Thompson, 1994; Yowell & Smylie, 1999).

None of this would happen without communication, specifically classroom talk. Classroom talk can occur in a variety of forms, serving many different purposes. Academically specific classroom talk can have a variety of meanings depending on where students are intellectually. During social classroom talk, individuals make their own interpretations of slang, utterances, and abbreviated meanings. Edwards and Westgate, (1994) claimed all talk is
essentially a form of social action or a means of accomplishing something worthwhile. The study of all forms of classroom talk has led to a better understanding of student-teacher relationships over the last 40 years (Barnes, 1976/1992; Edwards & Mercer, 1987; Fine, Lacey, & Baer, 1995; Mercer & Hodgkinson, 2008; Mercer, 1995; Noddings, 2006; Phillips, 1995; Pierce & Gilles, 2008; Scott, 2008; Simon, 2001; Wolk, 1998). Central to both teaching and learning, classroom talk involves both the content of the class and the social relationships within the classroom (Barnes, 2008; Edwards & Mercer, 1987). One type of classroom talk is classroom discussion. Typically more prevalent in social studies classrooms than the other academic subjects, discussions are valuable in that they have a greater propensity to connect information from the classroom to the students’ everyday lives (Hess, 2002; Larson, 1997; Wilen, 2004).

When students have a conversation that is meaningful and relevant, and the participants of that conversation have the freedom to disagree, real learning can take place, and real relationships can flourish. Many times students enjoy “hanging out” with teachers during free moments or engaging teachers in nonacademic talk during class. This allows students to feel their ways through adult conversations with a supportive counterpart (VanHoose, Strahan, & L’Esperance, 2001/2009). For these meaningful conversations to take place, all participants must care about the process of thinking and focus on their own ideas and the ideas of those around them (Barnes, 1992). This occurs because the nature of talk encourages people to reflect on their own thoughts. Teaching is most effective when learning is an interaction between two meanings, the teacher’s and the student’s, combining both into one shared idea (Barnes, 1992). Talking provides a way for students to reflect on their own thinking by way of accepting, rejecting, or meshing with others’ ideas, then reevaluating their own thinking again. Classrooms that offer opportunities to talk, encouraging students to discuss how
they learn in addition to what they learn, can enhance students’ ways of thinking and promote a more positive classroom climate (Van Hoose, et al., 2001/2009).

Barnes (1992) led teachers to study classroom talk in the 1960s. Along with some of his colleagues, Barnes decided that there was much to learn by listening to their students during English lessons. What they found extended beyond English lessons into all subject areas. More teachers followed the lead of Barnes and conducted their own classroom research. Eventually the original questions surrounding how students spoke to one another was altered to include why students said what they said and how the interaction of classroom talk was negotiated between teacher and students and student to student.

Barnes (1992) divided classroom talk into presentational talk and exploratory talk. Presentational talk is practiced, professional, and many times memorized. On the other hand, exploratory talk is halting and considered more casual and many times uncertain. This is the kind of talk that Barnes (1992) asserted was evidence of student learning. Presentational talk is also valuable, but teachers can rely on it too much without giving the students the time they need to think through their own (students’) ideas. Barnes claimed that teachers should consider the sequence of learning, and put exploratory talk first to allow students the freedom to become familiar with new ideas, and then put presentational talk second, as it will contribute more to student understanding by combining the students’ old views with their new thinking and interrelating these bits of knowledge. This enables students to think more about their own thinking (Barnes, 2008).

Active learning relates to the activities of the mind including attempts to “interrelate, interpret and understand new experiences and ideas” (Barnes, 2008, p. 2). Barnes made it clear that he acknowledges and understands that a teacher’s attention is divided between the content of
the lesson and managing the social relations in the classroom and that without doing either, learning could not take place. Barnes explained that while teachers think of the classroom as a whole, students think individually, resulting in each student making a somewhat different meaning through the combination of ideas. Both the individual meaning and the shared meanings are important for the student to experience in order to understand concepts in more depth (Barnes, 2008).

Unique Development of Middle School Students

Middle school students are unique in that they are constantly in the process of evolving into young adults. The five unique areas of development cognitive, physical, emotional, social, and moral dictate and at times haunt every moment of a middle school student’s life for at least a few years. According to the National Middle School Association (NMSA), students experience more individual changes between the ages of 10 and 15 than during any other period of development (NMSA, 2010, p. 5).

Cognitive development is highlighted by a student’s ability to look at the world less concretely and more abstractly. Physical development is many times more outwardly evident as boys may become lankly and awkward, and girls develop breasts and curves. Emotional and social development are introspective in nature, relying on the student’s own ways of thinking then acting in a particular and conscious manner (Noddings, 1992, 1994; Simon, 2001). Although all five developmental issues of middle school students are important in their own right, moral (sometimes referred to as character) development, questions that involve right and wrong can assist in the development of the other areas (Coles, 1986; Sergiovanni, 1994).
Character education is important because teachers want students to care about themselves and others. Teachers want students to be responsible members of their communities and society and to value fairness, honesty, and respect. Teachers want students to be empathetic to others. Most adults would agree that a society filled with selfish and callous citizens would be doomed. As a society, most adults value social tranquility and social order so that all citizens can feel safe (Kohn, 1997). How our students achieve these goals for character education through various character education programs may or may not be successful, but they will not connect them to others and the world as a whole as much as encouraging conversation about topics that matter (Noddings, 1994; Simon, 2001). The classroom and school climates as well as the relationships between teachers and students, need to be supportive of classroom talk about controversial questions so that students can have intellectual discussions that help them reach positive conclusions about issues of substance.

**Statement of the Problem**

Controversial questions in the classroom reflect students’ development, roles, and relationships within the classroom and the classroom and school climates. The responses to controversial questions from teachers to students can encourage or discourage students’ feelings of self-worth, their desires to learn more, and the development of their values and beliefs. Because of middle school students’ unique developmental issues, it can be crucial for their questions to get time and attention. Character education needs to be genuine in the discussion of crucial topics and controversial questions. Lounsbury (1991), a leader in middle school philosophy, recognized the need for teachers and students to connect through casual discussions and nonacademic questions he termed *wayside teaching*. He claimed that although some teachers may not want the responsibility of meaningful relationships with students, they are inherent in
the position of a middle school teacher. Students need teachers that they can look up to and who are willing to give their questions time and attention. Teachers who model empathy and promote personal reflection through open-ended discussions can help students become aware of their own ethics and compassion toward others, which can add to students’ self-confidence and feelings of self-worth (Greene, 1988; Kohn, 1997; Noddings, 2006; Palmer, 1998; Simon, 2001).

The goal of this research was to obtain from teachers their reasons for how and why they react and respond to controversial issues in the classroom. Through this process, teachers shared their own stories and responded to hypothetical scenarios through vignettes.

The research questions were as follows:

1.) How do teachers react and respond to controversial questions in the classroom? The sub-questions for this question were

a) How do the teachers interviewed view their relationships with students?

b) How do the teachers interviewed describe their classroom climate?

c) How do the teachers interviewed think a parent would describe their school?

d) How do the teachers interviewed describe their community?

e) What experience do the teachers interviewed have with character education?

f) What do the teachers interviewed believe are the most difficult developmental characteristics for middle school students?

2.) From the teachers’ perspectives, why do teachers respond to controversial questions the way that they do?

a) To what extent do teachers feel empowered to respond to controversial questions?

b) What do teachers perceive to be the restraints on dealing with these
Overview of the Methodology

This study was a grounded theory approach from a teacher’s perspective of controversial questions in the middle school classroom. The research was conducted with middle school academic teachers and intervention specialists (also referred to as Special Educators). This qualitative study included interviews of individuals and focus groups using vignettes.

Middle school teachers for this study were recruited through referrals from other teachers, professors, friends, and relatives of the participants, and teachers from professional organizations. All participants consented voluntarily and they were not compensated for their participation in this research. Participants were asked to give their informed consent according to Ashland University’s human subject procedures (see Appendix A). One-on-one interviews and focus group interviews were approximately 30-60 minutes in length, audio taped, and transcribed.

The study’s design took the philosophical stance of an emergent grounded theory design positioned between the rigid systematic design and the looser constructivist design. This position allows for a template for coding data, yet still permits a theory to emerge from the data collected through constant comparison that connects categories, resulting in an analysis regarding the relationship between the categories (Creswell, 2008). This development of a theory, taking shape as it emerges from the data is the major difference between grounded theory and other approaches (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Cresswell, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Although the theory that emerges is not usually of a global nature, it is important in day-to-day situations (Merriam, 1998). I followed the suggestion of Charmaz (2006) and used many of the steps in the
data analysis process to complement other approaches and gain a deeper understanding of the teachers’ perceptions.

The Professional Significance of the Study

Most research focusing on various teaching strategies relies on observations of classrooms. Nevertheless, only teachers can answer the questions of why they respond to controversial questions in a particular manner or why they may not react at all. Observations do not provide the insight into the teachers’ thought processes the way that interviews could (Larson, 1997). The teacher can best explain his or her thinking regarding choices of teaching strategies (Isenberg, 1990).

Delimitations of the Study

A limitation of this study was the small number of teachers interviewed and included in the focus groups. I chose to focus this study on teachers of language arts, science, social studies, math, and intervention specialists of middle school students. All of the teachers I interviewed were Caucasian and taught in middle-income public school districts in Ohio. Another limitation of this study was that I had no direct observations of teachers addressing controversial issues in their classrooms, only their interpretations of what they have done in the past or what they think they would do in the circumstances described in the vignettes. Twelve of my teacher participants were unable to meet me in person and agreed to write out their answers. At first glance, their answers appeared to be more concise than those directly interviewed. Upon closer review of the videos, there were some teachers who did not contribute as much as others. Due to the controversial nature of some of the questions, some participants may have contributed more
information in written form due to the anonymity this form of communication allowed. My study focused only on public school classrooms. Teachers from private schools or charter schools may or may not have revealed differences.

Definitions of Key Terms

Controversial questions: Any question that is debatable, causing an emotional response including, but not limited to, embarrassment, indignation, anxiety, or fear from students, parents of students, or teachers, typically of a real world nature. Questions that fit into the topic categories of war, making a living, learning and self-understanding, house and home, other people, animals and nature, advertising and propaganda, and gender as identified by Noddings (2006) were given the highest priority.

Existential questions: “issues involving the quality of existence—like those regarding health and emotional well-being” (Simon, 2001, p. 6)

Moral questions: “have to do with how human beings should act (or should have acted) in situations that involve the well-being of oneself, of other human beings, of other living things, or of the earth” (Simon, 2001, p. 6-7)

Summary of Dissertation Chapters

Chapter One includes my rationale for completing this study and my selection of methodology. Chapter Two includes a review of the literature regarding developmental issues of middle grades students, character education strategies, and a broad view of classroom talk. Chapter Three includes an outline of the design of the study and will provide an in-depth explanation of the methodology used in the study. The findings of the study are in
Chapter Four. Chapter Five presents the summary, conclusions, and recommendations of the study.
Middle school students are real people with the capacity to think and question the world around them. Many times middle school students are bombarded with information they do not understand or are attempting to process in relation to the adults or other peers in their lives. Occasionally, this thinking about the world creates wonder, angst, or worry in the minds of our middle school students (Snow, 1999). Middle school teachers are in the position to hear these questions, react, and respond. However, with the daily rigor of teaching responsibilities, how do teachers react and respond to students’ controversial questions in the classroom? Middle school students’ development is unique due to five specific areas of growth and maturation. The following sections contain brief descriptions of the five unique developmental characteristics of middle school students and how middle school teachers can assist students through them.

**Physical Development**

Parents and teachers see adolescents struggle daily with skin problems, weight gain and loss, feet and limb growth, and a host of other physical issues. Girls argue that they get the worst part of puberty, while boys typically stay quieter, unable or unwilling to verbalize their own physical awkwardness. Both genders tolerate their own physical growth and development in an idiosyncratic manner; girls tend to be more open with peers and trusted adults while boys tend to be more self-reliant (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000; Kommer, 2006; Pipher, 1994; Rimm, 2005; Sax, 2006).

Physically, puberty is the catalyst for many chaotic changes occurring within middle school students. Puberty includes not only brain chemistry,
Giedd, 2002; Kwon & Lawson, 2000; Sylwester, 2006; Wilson & Horch, 2002) hormonal changes, (Ormrod, 2004; Walsh, 2004) and physical composition (Ames, Ilg, & Baker, 1989; Rieser & Underwood, 1989), but also a student’s perception of self (Brooks-Gunn & Reiter, 1990; Dubas, Graber, & Petersen, 1991; Elias & Branden-Muller, 1994; Faust, 1960; Kindlon & Thompson, 2000; Pipher, 1994; Powell, 2010; Santrock, 2005; Stevenson, 2002). Biologically, puberty is the age at which males and females are initially capable of reproduction. Typically, however, the term puberty is used to indicate the transition period between childhood and adulthood. During this transition, adolescents can also experience problems with simultaneous tasks and emotional instability (Monroe, 2007).

The study of neuroscience in the adolescent brain provides one avenue of exploration into the brain development of middle school students. Neurobiologists focus on the areas of the brain containing synapses. Synapses are areas between two nerve cells that transmit signals and release chemicals called neurotransmitters, which are crucial to brain development. The number of synapses is evidence of intricate neuron paths (Wilson & Horch, 2002). These paths are then “pruned” if unused or strengthened if used a great deal. This is one reason why a variety of creative and intellectual experiences are warranted in the lives of children and adolescents, to strengthen as many synapses as possible, thus pruning few. Giedd (2002) referred to this as the "use it or lose it" (p. 1) principle. During adolescence, the synapses in the area of the prefrontal cortex controls many things including, organization, memory, prediction of consequences, and mood fluctuation (Casey, Giedd, & Thomas, 2000; Wilson & Horch, 2002). In addition, Kwon and Lawson (2000) also found evidence that maturation of the prefrontal lobes was linked to students’ abilities to discern information in scientific reasoning exercises.
In the back part of the brain, the cerebellum changes most dramatically during adolescence. Previously thought to control only the coordination of muscles, it is recently believed that the cerebellum is also involved in the coordination of cognitive processes (Giedd, 2002). This includes the ability of the student to focus intellectually through the cognitive demands of class work but also socially through the intricately woven threads of social interactions prevalent in middle school. Giedd also believed the "use it or lose it" principle holds for the cerebellum as well. Giedd explained, “If the cerebellum is exercised and used, both for physical activity but also for cognitive activities, it will enhance its development” (Giedd, 2002, p. 5).

Physical growth is triggered by hormones produced mainly by the endocrine glands. Endocrine glands release hormones directly into the blood stream or lymphatic system. Hormonal changes due to the increased production of estrogen and testosterone and the rise and fall of neurotransmitters, particularly, serotonin and dopamine, during puberty can affect the areas of concentration, organization, and impulse control (Ormrod, 2004, Walsh, 2004). Through these chemical and hormonal changes, middle school students are adjusting to the nuances of everyday middle school life and continually adapting to various levels of focus, energy, and disposition. Many of these adjustments are in relation to new experiences (curriculum, peers, etc.) which can add self-consciousness and anxiety to their daily lives.

Because this hormonal release is not consistent throughout the adolescent body, growth occurs at varying areas. This uneven growth, typically of the limbs and feet, lends a physical awkwardness. The average height for girls can fluctuate between 2-4 inches and 2.5-5 inches for boys (Rieser & Underwood, 1989). By age 12, most girls have reached 85% of their maximum height (Ames, Ilg, & Baker, 1989). They will also experience a redistribution of body fat, breast
development, and menarche, usually between the ages of 12 and 13 years. Physical development of boys will peak around age 14, on average, while many of the girls are finishing a growth period. Around age 12, boys will experience an increase of bone size, which results in a widening of the shoulders, elongated limbs, and larger feet. Due to the increase of testosterone, which stimulates the growth of the larynx, boys will also endure voice changes (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000).

Early or late development (more or less than the two-year average) brings with it additional issues. Although boys entering puberty early may enjoy a positive reputation gain (Santrock, 2005), the same is not true for girls. Girls who mature early are often not given the same prestige as their male counterparts and are reported as more quiet and withdrawn than girls who develop during the average age (Faust, 1960). Boys who mature later than average may have similar adjustment problems as early maturing girls (Stevenson, 2002). Academically speaking, late-maturing boys show lower achievement levels, while late-maturing girls show the highest achievement levels (Dubas, Graber, & Petersen, 1991). However, many of these studies disagree on how to actually measure early maturity and have reported conflicting results (Dorn, Dahl, Williamson, Birmaher, Axelson, Perel, et al., 2003). Suffice it to say early and late maturation rates can affect middle school students if for no other reason than they are different from their peers.

These physical changes, along with the social aspects of peer groups, promote an obsession of lookism that deems, according to media standards, a perfect body, clear skin, and ideal hair, and that psychologically condemns those that do not (or cannot) conform (Powell, 2010; Stevenson, 2002). Culturally defined ideals of attractiveness are coupled with the fact that biological changes do not occur simultaneously within each adolescent body or within middle
school students as a whole. The idea that each adolescent is not at the same stage of puberty as another can produce feelings of deficiency in comparison to peers that can concern middle school students (Elias & Branden-Muller, 1994). Girls’ and boys’ typical reactions to lookism and peer comparisons are based on the same anxious, self-conscious, and egocentric level, but outwardly demonstrated differently. Girls tend to be divided between their more authentic selves as lived in childhood and risk losing their friendships, or change their true identities to gain socially. This division can produce separate personalities in which privately they will be more “themselves” while publically they will conform to culturally deemed rules of conduct (Pipher, 1994). Boys may hide their feelings so as not to appear weak and insecure, and then many times initiate intimidating behavior toward other boys as reassurance for themselves (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000).

The physical changes that adolescents experience instigate emotional responses and magnify social inadequacies for many students. Powell (2010) asserted that physical development of adolescents influences every area of their lives: emotional, social, intellectual, and moral. Students also confirm their own feelings of restlessness, anxiety, and emotional highs and lows throughout the school day (Powell, 2010). Growth spurts do finally end as students begin high school. By that time, individual limbs have caught up with the rest of the body, skin begins to clear or students have figured out how to manage their own bodies. Individually, each has come to terms with his or her body, hormone changes, and ability to concentration. Collectively, as they continue to mature, they will have a unique sense of partnership with others who have experienced similar changes.

Teachers can make students’ physical changes easier to bear by allowing them to move their growing bodies through the classroom and avoiding lengthy lectures in which students must
remain seated. Powell (2010) stated that movement of middle school students actually promotes the learning process. For many adolescents, physical appearance is directly related to their self-esteem and behaviors may be less than desirable because of the physical awkwardness associated with this development. Developmentally responsive middle schools provide a comprehensive health and wellness program that promotes lifelong physical activity and fitness programs (NMSA, 2010).

**Cognitive Development**

Students’ cognitive development is as varied as their physical development. Wormeli (2001) compared students’ intellectual growth to toddlers beginning to walk when he wrote that all toddlers will eventually walk, nonetheless, it is an individual journey toward newly acquired knowledge and mastery of a new skill. Middle school students do not think like children, but they do not think like adults either. Powell (2010) described the process as *becoming*. She explained that generally 10- to 14-year-olds are concrete thinkers. However, when studying middle school students’ intellectual development, exceptions are the rule. There are some 11-year-olds who are already making progress toward abstract thinking and yet some students will not have the ability to think abstractly until the ages of 17 or 18 (Powell, 2010). Piaget (1972) claimed there could be up to four years of “time lag” (p. 36) between students within the formal operations stage. Maturation controls the process of moving from the concrete stage to the abstract stage, to some extent, which also affects students’ abilities to think critically (Ormrod, 2004; Powell, 2010; Van Hoose, Strahan, & L’Esperance, 2001). As we know from the previous section, various levels of maturation occur at various stages within the period of adolescence.
Some adolescents are identified by teachers as being gifted. Reported by National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2011), giftedness is defined by the U.S. Department of Education as a term used to identify “students who are endowed with a high degree of mental ability or who demonstrate unusual physical coordination, creativity, interest, or talent (often in the visual or performing arts)” (p. 4). Bonner (2005) found that within a research study by Yale University (PACE Center) Transitions in the Development of Giftedness, the students defined giftedness as the interconnectedness between self-confidence, intelligence, and determination. Tomlinson (2006) claimed that gifted students may be advanced in one or more subject area or may possess expertise in areas such as computers or leadership, which contribute toward success in academics. A gifted student may be from a variety of family configurations, income levels, or ethnic backgrounds. A gifted student may also be average or even show weakness in some academic areas, but excel in others (Anafara, Andrews, & Mertens, 2005).

A student may also be labeled with a disability. Students with disabilities are protected through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA ensures early intervention, special education, and related services to children from birth through age 21. In middle school, many students may be referred to as learning disabled or simply as low-level learners. Identified students who struggle academically have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which states the student’s current level of academic performance, academic goals, and services the school will provide the student throughout the academic school year. Students with learning disabilities may also struggle with mental health and self-esteem issues (Johnson, 1995). In many middle schools, gifted students may have separate classes for accelerated learning, although the rate of students with learning disabilities, labeled as low-level or cognitively
delayed (and many times multi-handicapped and emotionally disturbed) are increasingly mainstreamed into the regular classroom.

Rimm (2005) found adolescents’ perceptions of their own intelligence was divided by gender. She found, in general, that more girls considered themselves smart than boys did, yet when asked to rate their intelligence, fewer girls rated themselves as having above-average intelligence. Even among girls who received higher grades, 14% felt they had only average intelligence. Rimm’s conclusion was that even when girls had high grades, their confidence in their own cognitive abilities continued to wane.

Teachers need to be aware of varying intellectual levels, accommodating for low-level learners and challenging gifted students. Planning a variety of activities in small blocks that encourage students’ imaginations, challenging their thinking toward more abstract concepts can accommodate students' short attention spans. National Middle School Association (2010) encourages curriculum and instruction that develop meaningful concepts and opportunities for students to reflect on their own learning.

**Psychological Development**

Middle school students worry on a daily basis, and they have much to worry about. From skin problems to athletic ability, pleasing teachers and parents, to finding and keeping a best friend, every aspect of their lives is consumed with decisions to be made, responses to give, and actions to take. Middle school students may be perplexed or overly confident. Extremes on either end tend to dominate middle school student moods. They either do not know enough about themselves to know how to handle pressures that come from all angles, teachers, parents, girls, boys, and so on, but occasionally pretend to know everything. Most adolescents are trying very
hard to either fit in or rebel. The quest for self is a lonely, demanding position that can cause fret and anxiety on a daily basis (Powell, 2010; Snow, 1999).

Psychological (or emotional) development of middle school students coupled with their physical and cognitive development can best be described as a roller coaster ride. As previously discussed, hormones may cause a temporary chemical imbalance resulting in extreme sensitivity, worry, fear, and anxiety (Caissy, 1994; Powell, 2010), but there is much research regarding the psychological adjustments of middle school students necessary due to the transition from elementary school to middle school. Students must learn how to navigate through a much larger building with a larger student population and a more rigorous workload. These stumbling blocks and others can lead to increased referrals to the school counselor due to experimentation with drugs and alcohol, violence, and attendance problems, which can, in turn, add to behaviors such as anxiety, depression, and antisocial behavior (Elias, 2002; Elkind, 1998, 2001; Hankin et al., 1998; Kazdin, 1993; Nolen-Hoesksema, Giris, & Seligman, 1992; Petersen et al., 1993; Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001). Classroom expectations may differ in teacher style and student responsibilities resulting in less classroom decision making and less input into classroom rules (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Rudolph, et al. (2001) found adolescents who believed they had little influence over their success in school and who showed minimal investment in academics became more depressed when they experienced a transition into middle school. In a research study conducted by Akos and Galassi (2004), students reported that they compensated for the uncomfortable transition by hanging out with friends, attempting to fit it, and ignoring those that picked on them.

The development of a personal identity is at its strongest during the middle level years. The decision to act a particular way, to speak to particular others, and to be a particular
student is prevalent in the minds of many middle school students. Erickson (1968) and Marcia (1980) found that 10- to 11-year-olds rely heavily on what they are capable of doing successfully to deem their personal identity. Students who have been encouraged to do well in sports and have succeeded may consider themselves jocks; the student who has been successful academically may choose to be a brain. At this young age, this very simplistic view of oneself makes this decision easy because, as far as they can tell, the decision was already made for them. What they do well is what they are.

Twelve- to fifteen-year olds, however, are in the stage Erickson termed *Identity versus Role Confusion*. It is marked by the adolescents’ explorations of identities, if those identities were previously successful. However, occasionally, many times in the spirit of independence and experimentation, middle school students will find previously unexplored areas enjoyable and worth pursuing even though success is not guaranteed. The way students view themselves and their self-esteem can be a matter of gender, ethnic group, or relationship to family (Adams, Kuhn, & Rhodes, 2006; Cashwell, 1995; Greenberg, Siegel, & Leitch, 1983). A high self-esteem is one in which a student shows self-respect and self-worth through his or her attitudes and actions; a low self-esteem is one in which the student believes he or she is deficient in personality or attractiveness (Rosenberg, 1965). Self-reported data gathered from more than 4,000 adolescents in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade by Adams, Kuhn, and Rhodes (2006) found that, despite the idea that low socioeconomics would create low self-esteem, gender, and ethnic group identification as better predictors of high self-esteem. The students reported that self-esteem decreased more for Caucasian females than for African American males and females. Although African American middle school students began with a higher self-esteem in the sixth grade, it remained high throughout their middle school experience. Hispanic adolescents, in
comparison, experienced a lower self-esteem than both Caucasian and African American students, but the levels of esteem remained stable through the eighth grade. Caucasian middle school students, specifically girls, were the only ethnic group to experience self-esteem as somewhat high in the sixth grade, and then plunge in the seventh grade to further wane in the eighth grade resulting in a lower self-esteem than Hispanic peers (Adams, Kuhn, & Rhodes, 2006). Girls, regardless of ethnic group, repeatedly reported lower self-esteem than boys (Carlson, Uppal, & Prosser, 2000; Dubois, Bull, Sherman, & Roberts, 1998; Ornstein, 1995; Sotelo, 2000). In addition, although middle school teachers were aware that middle school students gravitate more toward friends than family, Greenburg, Siegel, and Leitch (1983) found that attachment to families was a powerful predictor of high self-esteem.

Teachers must understand that regulation of emotions is difficult for middle school students. In many instances, adolescents will simply benefit by voicing their feelings. At other times, however, this emotional inconsistency leads to poor decision making. Teachers can assist students in decision making by modeling the difference between reacting and responding (Powell, 2010). Teaming is an important organizational structure of the middle school concept that can help students adjust and thrive in the middle school setting by providing a small group of caring professionals that understand their psychological issues (NMSA, 2010).

Social Development

Adolescents value their peer groups as a source of comfort at this stressful age. Csikszentmihalyi and Larson’s (1974) study found the amount of time adolescents spend with their peers increases dramatically in comparison to the amount of time adolescents spend with their parents or other adults. Peer relationships are stronger and more influential than the
relationships formed during their childhood according to Berndt (1982). Many times being a part of any group is more important than not being a part of a certain group (Powell, 2010). However, the need to conform to the group is always present in the beginning of middle school; as students mature, this need to belong typically decreases (Berndt, 1982; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986).

Adolescents value friendships for many reasons. One reason friendships are important is that the teens need social groups to feel a sense of belonging so that emotionally they know they are not alone. Adolescents also use friendships as mirrors, sometimes copying their dress, mannerisms, tastes, and attitudes, other times trying something unique, but still watching their friends’ reactions to see if it is accepted before wearing it in public (Perlstein, 2003). Adolescents need other adolescents to make them more comfortable to be themselves.

Although positive friendships prevail, relational aggression, more prevalent in girl peer groups than in boy peer groups (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), can include verbal and nonverbal exclusion (Crick, 1996), and it can have long-term negative effects such as depression and anxiety (Simmons, 2002). Simmons argued that because relational aggression does not follow what teachers and parents typically view as aggression, including nonverbal gesturing, bossiness, and possessiveness, it is disregarded. Boy peer groups tend to demand a sense of strength and masculinity. Boys can create environments, literal and emotional, whereas the older, the larger, and the stronger will taunt the younger, smaller, or weaker and as a group jeopardize the security of a boy who does not belong to a specific group (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000). Many times teachers will excuse the more abusive behavior of both girls and boys as typical preteen behavior (Perlstein, 2003).
Boyfriend and girlfriend relationships can be especially appealing to middle school students (Perlstein, 2003; Powell, 2010). These relationships can be healthy introductions into adult relationships, but they need supervision. Boys and girls naturally view these relationships differently; girls tend to see them as extensions of girl relationships and a growing up entitlement. In addition, they may be used as another mirror to see if she is okay by middle school standards. Boys typically experience relationships purely from a carnal perspective of sexual experimentation (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000). Dating or going out with the opposite sex is a practice run at how to behave in a couple situation. It requires consideration of another, time spent with another, and speaking to another (typically through text, phone, or instant message). Friends’ parties or school dances can also be experiments in intimacy with low lights, touching, and intimate games like Spin the Bottle and Seven Minutes in Heaven (Perlstein, 2003). Many times these relationships end for no reason at all, shaking an adolescent’s sense of self-esteem. Other times, it may not faze them as they themselves are feeling the need to move on to a new crush.

Teachers can support middle school students’ social development in and out of the classroom. Informal socialization can be accomplished in the classroom by grouping and regrouping students for discussions and activities (Powell, 2010). Flexible seating allows students a variety of work environments and various cooperative groups. Students should be made aware that a teacher’s role includes academic assistance, but also the teacher is an advocate, supporting their personal development (NMSA, 2010).
Moral Development

Moral development is an important and often forgotten part of adolescent development. As students mature, they begin to ask themselves questions regarding the world and their place in it. Adolescents, struggling with self-identity, frequently struggle with “who am I” questions and wonder where they fit in. Beane and Lipka (1987) found that students’ self-concept and ideas of how happy they are with their own identities are completely revamped during middle school.

Piaget’s seminal research in 1932 was one of the first to develop a theory of moral stages that Kohlberg (1969) used to develop his own theory of moral development. Kohlberg’s theory contends that if people advance through stages of moral development, they will proceed in the same way, however, not always at the same rate. Kohlberg asserted that moral reasoning is based on attitudes of fairness and justice.

Gilligan (1982), however, developed a theory of moral development specific to females claiming that Kohlberg used a masculine model that predisposed women to be morally inferior in comparison to men. Gilligan then insisted that women were not any more deficient in moral reasoning than men, but more focused on areas of care and responsibility as opposed to fairness and justice.

Skoe and Goodon (1993) were the first to research the differences in moral reasoning by gender specifically for 11- and 12-year-olds. They found that when students were considering real-life problems of a moral nature, girls’ focus was on tending the feelings of others and continuing friendships and boys focused on leisure activities and conflict avoidance.

Answers to questions that involve right and wrong, which as elementary students tended to be more black and white or were influenced by their parents’ opinions, are suddenly issues adolescents find more complex and often confusing. Often the moral development of adolescents
also includes questions regarding immortality, existentialism, and religion (Noddings, 1992, 1994; Simon, 2001).

Students are inundated with moral issues such as cheating, teasing, bullying, lying, the care of others less fortunate, drugs and alcohol use, and sex. Many writers of moral education endorse and encourage controversial discussions in the classroom (Greene, 1988; Noddings, 1988, 1992, 1994, 1998, 2006; Simon, 2001). Greene (1988) claimed that students need to have opportunities to share in a struggle to understand the nature and benefits of freedom. She encouraged participation in the arts in an effort to promote imagination, claiming that once students can imagine possibilities, they can express empathy. Once students understand empathy, they can then understand why fighting for freedom is a valuable endeavor. Greene believed that *praxis*, or the acting together to change reality, is a social undertaking in the quest for freedom and challenges students to question the way things have always been which she termed *mystification*. Greene encouraged students to question the world around them and to create meaning in their lives. She believed that consciousness is the ability to view the world through multiple realities, and reflectiveness is making meaning of our experiences, which constitutes reality. Greene believed that the goal of education should be to help students to realize their deep connection to and responsibility for their own experiences and for other human beings in the world (Greene, 1988; Pautz, 1998). Noddings’ (1988, 1992, 1994, 2006) focus on caring included a teacher’s obligation to model caring toward and between students, encouraged open-ended dialogue, designing experiences for students to practice caring for others and affirmed and encouraged the best in others. Goldstein (1999) argued that teachers, by demonstrations of caring, encourage intersubjectivity, common interests that promote interaction, and shared awareness. Finally, Palmer (1998) spoke to teachers about connecting authentically with
students. He asserted that to teach is to “create a space in which the community of truth is practiced” (p. 90). He believed that the most unruly students are driven, not by the anger they typically display, but by fear.

In recent years, moral development has become interchangeable with character development. Coles (1986), in his discussion of character with students, found that they defined character as “a person who sticks to a set of principles,” “a person who has courage,” a person “who plays fair,” and a person “who doesn’t lie and cheat” (p. 142). Many schools have developed or adopted character programs that outline catchy phrases, songs, activities for the day, week, month, or school year that will encourage students to develop positive character behaviors. Although some programs are successful, more times than not, a climate of community is blatantly missing, leaving behind merely nice words (Kommer, personal communication, January 12, 2010). Advocacy, most recently promoted by the National Middle School Association (2010), stresses support, content, and expectations within the social, emotional, and personal concerns of students. Advocacy encourages teachers to support and guide students toward responsible behavior by developing nurturing relationships between teachers and students. Simon (2001) encouraged moral and existential questions in the classroom by integrating them into course curriculum. These included questions involving right and wrong and those questioning the existence of God. Simon contended that when teachers use classroom time for in-depth discussions of valuable concepts, it not only promotes intellectual skills, but students claim to learn more about themselves and the world around them, which assists in their moral development.
Notable Contributions in Character Education

Although there have been a wide variety of approaches to character education, the following approaches have made an impact in training students to simply be good people. The virtues approach to character education, as termed by Simon (2001), is to teach right from wrong. It does not encourage discussion and makes no attempt to find any intellectual connection through discussion or argumentation perhaps due to its conservative promoters, William Bennett, Edward Wynn, Kevin Ryan, and William Kilpatrick. The virtues approach goal is to encourage students to be like good adults: hard working, truthful, and generous. Breiner (1993) claimed that Bennett’s book, *The Book of Virtues*, asserted that teachers can use the characters as models, but did not encourage the give and take of a deep discussion. Wynne (1989) wrote that because “appropriate adults” know more than children know, it is those adults’ responsibility to teach children what they know and how to act. Ryan (1989), who wrote *In Defense of Character Education*, viewed children as “self-centered” and unable to see beyond their own needs and wants. Although students’ psychological development that they are, in fact, periodically self-centered. This is a sporadic and temporary mindset and should not be the reason character education is taught (Kohn, 1997). Finally, Kilpatrick (1992) wrote in *Why Johnny Can’t Tell Right from Wrong* about rediscovering our traditional character education as an alternative to teaching nothing. He blamed most behavior issues on the students’ *willfulness* rather than issues of relationships or classroom climate. Virtues approach to character education provides a limited view of right and wrong and the reasons behind the actions. Typically, those that endorse the virtues approach blame students’ lack of character on the schools for not teaching character education appropriately (Simon, 2001).
Cognitive Developmentalism led by Kohlberg in 1970 attempted to answer how moral reasoning developed in children. Kohlberg’s limited sample of 75 boys relied on hypothetical dilemmas not necessarily connected to academics or school situations.

Kohlberg published the following moral stages:

1. Preconventional level:
   Stage 1: The punishment-and-obedience orientation
   Stage 2: The instrumental-relativist orientation

II. Conventional level:
   Stage 3: The interpersonal concordance or “good boy-nice girl” orientation
   Stage 4: The “law and order” orientation

III. Postconventional, autonomous, or principled level
   Stage 5: The social-contract, legalistic orientation
   Stage 6: The universal-ethical-principle orientation (Bereiter, 1978, pp. 54-55)

In Kohlberg’s model, the goal of the teacher is to press students to make a choice that would then classify their level of moral reasoning. Kohlberg also believed that children progress toward higher levels of moral reasoning just given time (as cited in Bereiter, 1978).

Similar to the virtues approach, values education, which was popular in the 1970s, requires no decision making, discussions, or questioning from students. In the book *Values Clarification*, S. Simon, Howe, and Kirschenbaum (1995) claimed that instead of a set of prescribed values to which students are to agree, the value education position is that there is no consensus about moral values. Values education states that values must be chosen freely by the student depending on the group affiliation at the time (school, peers, home, etc.). The book *Values Clarification* does provide strategies for teachers to discuss some moralistic views but
does not specify what type of measurement is used to decide what action is superior or inferior to any other choices (K. Simon, 2001). This leaves students without the knowledge of how to evaluate their own viewpoints, consider the consequences of their decisions, or the encouragement to gather information to enhance their understanding on a continual basis (K. Simon, 2001).

Noddings’ (1992) ethics of care focuses on how teachers can lay the groundwork for students to begin understanding and appreciating ethical behaviors. Noddings (1988) claimed teachers should abandon the traditional division of curriculum from English, math, science, and social studies, and link all intellectual goals to the ethics of caring specifically, caring relationships. Her reasoning was that behaving morally involved a universal understanding of the ability and willingness to care for and accept care from others. The goal of teaching the ethics of caring should not only produce “moral people, but also an education that is moral in purpose, policy and methods” (Simon, 2001, p. 27).

In 1995, Deborah Meier and Paul Schwarz, of the Central Park East Secondary School in New York, chose the two values of empathy and skepticism to emphasize in their classrooms. Empathy (n.d.) was defined as the ability to identify with and understand others' feelings or the ability to see a situation from the eyes of another, and skepticism was defined as a tendency to doubt what others accept to be true. Both empathy and skepticism require a student to discuss and make intelligent choices. Kohn stated in 1997, there are “concrete differences between a school dedicated to turning out students who are empathic and skeptical and a school dedicated to turning out students who are loyal, patriotic, obedient, and so on” (p. 8).

Although many character education programs provide minor, temporary, extrinsic rewards through the use of regurgitated sayings, themes, or conformity toward "being good,"
only those programs that encourage classroom talk in the form of discussions and questioning have a lasting, more intrinsic value for the students. Simply telling students what to value instead of guiding students through controversial discussions allowing for disagreement and others’ opinions, is not teaching character, but demanding compliance (Kohn, 1997; Noddings, 1994, 1998, 2006; Simon, K., 2001).

**Classroom Climate**

Classrooms that operate as miniature communities within democratic societies have been the goal of many successful middle schools for several years as a means to promote positive culture and academically thriving students (Beane, 2005; Goodlad, 1984; Sergiovanni, 1994; Springer, 2006). In 1984, Goodlad called for a change in the current practices of the middle school (referred to as junior high school) classrooms to include more participation, decision making, and mutual respect among students, and less control and more concern from teachers. Sergiovanni (1994) claimed that for schools to be communities there must be a sense of duty to others and to the community, a bonding of students and teachers to collective ideals, and a sense of self-determination to uphold the relationships within the community. He further promoted the development of relationships between teachers and students as humans have a natural inclination to want to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Lewis, Schaps, and Watson (1996) identified five principles that create what they referred to as “the caring classroom’s academic edge”:

- Warm, supportive, stable relationships,
- Constructive learning,
- Important, challenging curricula,
• Intrinsic motivation, and
• Attention to social and ethical dimensions of learning (p. 2-3).

Beane (2005) promoted similar ideas in his description of the democratic classroom, involving students in decision-making and developing relationships with students that encourage leadership and responsibility.

**Perspectives of Teaching and Learning**

According to the constructivist approach to learning would a students’ own mental capacity determines much of the students’ success. Vygotsky’s social constructivist approach to learning maintains that the students construct meaning within their own minds in a social environment (Smith, 1995). On the other hand, the sociocultural perspective posits that learning is a product of the interaction between participants and the influence of a particular group setting on the interaction (Cobb, 1996; Wertsch, 1991).

When comparing constructivism, Vygotsky’s social constructivism, and the sociocultural perspectives of teaching and learning, one can consider the role of the teacher. Through numerous qualitative descriptions, researchers from the constructivist perspective have provided researchers with an understanding of what a good relationship between students and teachers looks like (Davis, 2003; Finders, 1997; Goldstein, 1999; Manke, 1997; McCallum, 2001; Mergendoller & Packer, 1985; Muller, Katz, & Dancer, 1999; Oldfather & Dahl, 1994; Page, 1987). These studies have enlightened teachers and researchers in various viewpoints involving student-teacher relationships including attachment and motivation, teacher expectations, educational culture of a school, and control, autonomy, and responsibility in the classroom. In the constructivist perspective, Piaget (1973) noted the difficulties for the teacher in providing
vast amounts of information to students. The teacher is also responsible for designing and arranging classroom experiences that challenge students’ thinking. In addition, the teacher is responsible for providing examples and leading questions to encourage the students to rethink their original ideas. Although within the constructivist perspective Piaget focused on discovery learning and learning accomplished alone. Vygotsky, the leader of social constructivism, claimed that both teachers and older or more experienced students are important to the learning of other students. He claimed that culture provides students the cognitive tools necessary for development of cultural history, social context, and language. He promoted his ideas of *zone of proximal development*, claiming that students could learn a certain amount of information unassisted, but needed guidance to master information at the students’ next appropriate level. Four principles guided Vygotsky:

- Learning and development are socially collaborative activities.
- The Zone of Proximal Development should be used as a guide to educators for curricula design.
- Activities outside and inside of school should complement one another.
- The class curriculum should focus on real world issues.

Social constructivism is based on three broad ideas:

- reality is constructed through human activity;
- knowledge is socially and culturally constructed, meaning that individuals create their own meanings through their interactions with others and their environment;
- how one learns is an active social process (i.e., within a positive relationship between students and teachers) (Kim, 2001).
In Vygotsky’s social constructivist perspective of teaching the teacher would lead students by questioning, then model appropriate self-questioning responses, followed by additional direction (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). In what is known as reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984), students learn how to ask themselves questions about their knowledge by first watching as the teacher models. As some students gain mastery, they also begin to model how to self-question. Learning through the social constructivism lens is not led only by the teacher, but it is distributed between all students and the teacher so that all participants have ownership of the experience (Bredo, 1994).

Sociocultural researchers study human interactions and look for recurring patterns within student and teacher discussions, classroom settings, and school cultures against community backgrounds rather than solitary students (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983; Cobb & Yackel, 1996; Davis, 2003; Goldstein, 1999; Hamilton, 1983; Oldfather & Dahl, 1994; Rogoff, 1984, 1996; Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Turner & Meyer, 2000). The sociocultural perspective focuses on the interactions between the student and teacher and the reciprocity of language within their particular social construction (Smith, 1995). The sociocultural approach not only accepts, but also demands, the influence of the classroom, the school, the community, etc. on the student-teacher relationship, all of which are dictated through societal norms (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Davis, 2003; DeVries & Zan, 1996; Goldstein, 1999; Oldfather & Dahl, 1994; Wells, 1996). Edwards and Westgate (1994) explained the importance of culture specifically on talk when he stated, “the process of learning how to negotiate communicatively is the very process by which one enters the culture” (p. 12). The sociocultural perspective of teaching places the student-teacher relationship at the forefront, while still looking outward through the influence of the classroom, school, and community as well. The
sociocultural perspective cannot separate relationships from the classroom, school, and community, but views them as embedded and influenced by each one’s unique culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983; Cobb, 1996; Cobb & Yackel, 1996; Davis, 2003; Goldstein, 1999; Hamilton, 1983; Oldfather & Dahl, 1994; Page, 1987; Rogoff, 1984, 1996; Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Turner & Meyer, 2000). From a teacher’s perspective, a classroom of accelerated students in a wealthy neighborhood whose community is highly involved in the academic affairs of the school would have different priorities than teaching academically struggling students in a poor neighborhood within a community whose attention must be diverted between safety, nutrition, and healthcare concerns.

To summarize the perspectives of teaching and learning, Bereiter (1994) stated, “stripped to their essentials, constructivism tells us to pay close attention to the mental activities of the learner, and socioculturalism tells us to pay close attention to cultural practices in the learner's milieu” (p. 21). When considering reactions and responses of middle school teachers to controversial discussions, I argue that there must be a combination of all: the individual, and a particular group, in a particular classroom of a particular school, within a particular community, which is essentially, the sociocultural perspective. Obviously, knowledge and the unique meanings surrounding that knowledge that are presented by both the teacher and student are active and the process of discussion is essentially social. However, without the cultural background, including climate of the classroom and school, these meanings lack specific and genuine understanding. Vygotsky (1962) would agree with this idea as he explained that language, although eventually an individual act, begins as social interaction. He also believed
that meanings and the purpose behind words and sentences are essentially rooted within our social relationships (as cited in Barnes, 1976) (see Table 1).
Table 1

Main points of Constructivist, Social Constructivist, and Sociocultural Approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Constructivist</th>
<th>Social Constructivist</th>
<th>Sociocultural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major Contributor(s)</td>
<td>Piaget</td>
<td>Vygotsky</td>
<td>Vygotsky/Wertsch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Responsibility</td>
<td>Designing and arranging classroom experiences</td>
<td>Questioning then modeling self-questioning responses</td>
<td>Positive interactions and reciprocity of language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus of Approach</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>Combination of self, others, and milieu: classroom climate, parental perception school climate, community support, community SES, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Classroom Talk

Communication between teachers and students with the goal of transferring information has long been the goal of education. Although this communication can take various forms, verbal communication is prevalent. Hodgkinson and Mercer (2008), defined classroom talk as a vehicle by which students and their peers make meaning. Without understanding the give and take between teachers and students, meanings would be lost. Edwards and Westgate (1994) stressed the importance of classroom talk because of its “centrality in the processes of learning, and its value as evidence of how relationships and meanings are organized” (p. 1).

For more than forty years, classroom talk has been a rich source of information for both students and teachers (Barnes, Britton, & Rosen, 1969; Edwards & Mercer, 1987; Fine, et al., 1995; Mercer & Hodgkinson, 2008; Mercer, 1995; Noddings, 2006; Phillips, 1995; Pierce & Gilles, 2008; Scott, 2008; Simon, 2001; Wolk, 1998). Barnes (2008) first introduced models of classroom talk. He claimed that classroom talk that strengthens social relations is as important as academic content and most important to the goals of teaching.

As long as students are comfortable in the classroom, exploratory talk, talk that is casual and uncertain, is used to sort out their thoughts, allowing students to try out various ideas for self- and public evaluation. On the other hand, presentational talk is polished, controlled, and continually regulated to fit the expectations of a particular audience in a particular venue (Barnes, 1992). Social support during classroom talk is critical because the term common knowledge (Edwards & Mercer, 1987; Mercer, 1995)
indicates that the acquisition of knowledge is essentially a social practice. How teachers react to and respond or silence students’ questions within exploratory talk is critical in the development of students as lifelong learners. When an authentic community of learners talk, students are comfortable enough to disagree and challenge each other’s ideas, not out of selfishness, but out of interest. For this to happen, students must care; they must care about their own thoughts and ideas, giving them time and focus, and they must care about the other students’ viewpoints (Barnes, 1976). This is similar to creating democratic classrooms that encourage students’ discussions of difficult issues including friendship disputes, bullying, multiple viewpoints, and social change ideas (Fine, et al., 1995; Pierce & Gilles, 2008; Wolk, 1998). Active learning relates to the activities of the mind including attempts to “interrelate, interpret and understand new experiences and ideas” (Barnes, 1976, p. 14). When students feel that the knowledge they gain from the classroom is beneficial to their own lives, they will integrate it into their own world, extending beyond the classroom (Barnes, 1976). Phillips (1995) argued that for a teaching/learning partnership, the meanings behind discussions and the level of understanding within the conversation are all of significant value.

Noddings, in her book, *Critical Lessons* (2006), wrote that teachers should support classroom talk to inspire and encourage student exploration in the areas of war, home life, other people, parenting, animals and nature, advertising and propaganda, making a living, gender, religion, and social advocacy. Noddings chose these topics because most students care about these issues and they are beneficial for students to discuss at varying stages of their development. Simon (2001) contended that students should be given the opportunity to discover their own thoughts regarding morals and
existentialism through classroom talk, because ultimately, these types of questions are at the heart of all subjects and almost everyone finds these types of conversations interesting. Pierce and Gilles (2008), in their research of critical conversations in literature discussion groups, found that students use classroom talk to analyze the world around them and to involve others in making socially conscious changes. They further suggested that classrooms allow and encourage social talk, exploratory talk, presentational talk, meta-talk (talk about artifacts), and critical talk.

Mercer and Dawes (2008) categorized educational talk (talk used in the teaching and learning curriculum) by distinguishing between talk that is symmetrical and talk that is asymmetrical. If one party has more control, such as a teacher in teacher-pupil conversation in which knowledge from the teacher translates to the pupil, it is deemed as asymmetrical. Symmetrical talk is found more often between pupils in learning discussions. Barnes and Todd (1977) argued that both symmetrical and asymmetrical talk are valuable in the classroom. This is similar to Scott’s (2008) distinction between interactive and non-interactive talk as a division of power and control in the classroom.

Much research has been done on a particular three-part exchange referred to as an I-R-F (Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). An I-R-F exchange refers to an initiation by the teacher, followed by a response from a student, and finally a follow-up or feedback statement, again by the teacher. Mercer and Dawes (2008) explained in their research that this type of exchange is in classrooms all over the world and it is best explained as a technique that demands certain conformity from students and promotes control of teachers. They claimed that ground rules of classroom talk are important in that they promote a necessary social order to maintain a course toward completion of the
current curriculum. Rojas-Drummond and Mercer (2004), however, found that teachers who integrate more questions into their classroom conversations promote more pupil involvement and greater learning, but also use the I-R-F exchange. Wegerif and Dawes (2004) noted a discussion element into the I-R-F exchange when teachers ask students to discuss a question initiated by the teacher. They found that this process provides the students with time to think and discuss the question, through exploratory talk between peers, before responding to the teacher using presentational talk.

Summary

In summary, middle school students experience many changes in all of the developmental areas at varying times and to varying degrees. Teachers and students are influenced by the climate of the classroom, the expectations of the school, and the norms of their communities. The support and guidance of teachers willing to develop relationships and provide students with time and attention to discuss controversial issues can influence middle school students’ own self-awareness, self-esteem, and the way they view the world. Communication is the backbone of education; without teachers and students we cannot make meanings, exchange information, or develop relationships.
CHAPTER III

Methodology

Teachers can be prominent influencers in the lives of middle school students, shaping their ideas about the world in which they live and promoting positive interactions within their communities. Developmentally, middle school students are in need of teachers who understand their physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and moral development to mature into healthy, happy teenagers. Positive relationships between middle school students and responsible adults can contribute to more emotionally stable and academically successful students (Beane, 2005). Teachers, however, already devote endless hours to a multitude of other responsibilities from endless paperwork, hall duty, and mediation, to teaching state prescribed curriculum content. When the chaos of the hallways clears and teachers close their doors, what priority prevails? When classroom discussions veer from mundane to emotionally charged, whether they be of a political nature, questions of sexual orientation, or racism, how do teachers react and respond? Questions that evoke strong emotion can be a tenuous tightrope or an opportunity. The goal of this research was to explore how and why teachers respond to students’ controversial questions in the classroom.

The participants were public middle school teachers in central Ohio. This study investigated teachers’ perceptions of classroom climate, parents’ support and community support. I also used Typology Code Designations from the Ohio Department of Education and community Supplemental Educational Service (SES) to consider sociocultural influences in teachers’ responses. During interviews, I asked participants to
describe their own communities, classroom climate, and perceptions from parents as well as the student-teacher relationships they strive to establish and maintain. In addition, responses to the vignettes placed teachers in hypothetical situations in which they could explain their actions and the reasons behind those actions while addressing controversial questions in their classroom. I piloted the basic outline of questions and vignettes in my home school and discussed them with colleagues to further develop and clarify my intent.

I chose a grounded theory study to enable further insight into teacher behaviors. Charmaz (2006) suggests grounded theory because it “favors analysis over description, fresh categories over preconceived ideas and extant theories, and systematically focused sequential data collection over large initial samples” (p. 187). My goal in this research was to discover from teachers their own attitudes and beliefs regarding controversial questions in the classroom. To accomplish this goal, I wanted to analyze data in my participants’ words and allow their voices to be heard through their responses to the vignettes and recollections of their own classroom experiences. I chose grounded theory because I believed there were reasons behind teachers’ actions when faced with controversial questions in the classroom that were unknown, and found grounded theory to be the appropriate venue in which to investigate these reasons.

The research questions were as follows
1.) How do teachers react and respond to controversial questions in the classroom? The sub-questions for this question were as follows:

   a) How do the teachers interviewed view their relationships with students?
   b) How do the teachers interviewed describe their classroom climate?
c) How do the teachers interviewed think a parent would describe their school?

d) How do the teachers interviewed describe their community?

e) What experience do the teachers interviewed have with character education?

f) What do the teachers interviewed believe are the most difficult developmental characteristics for middle school students?

2.) From the teacher’s perspectives, why do teachers respond to controversial questions the way that they do?

a) To what extent do teachers feel empowered to respond to controversial questions?

b) What do teachers perceive to be the restraints on dealing with these questions?

The Use of Qualitative Methodology in Classroom Talk Research

Merriam (1998) described qualitative researchers as people interested in others and how they understand and experience the world. She identified five characteristics of qualitative research. The first is referred to as the emic, or insider’s view of the research, rather than the etic, or outsider’s view. The second characteristic is the humanistic side of qualitative research that is necessary for readers to understand the research as opposed to questionnaires, surveys, etc. The third characteristic is that researchers become intimate with the experience that is being explored. The fourth characteristic is that qualitative research applies an inductive research strategy that challenges beliefs and develops ideas
or hypotheses rather than testing present theories. Finally, Merriam stated that the product of qualitative research is more vivid in the use of words and pictures, rather than numbers and direct quotes from participants. All of the above points are significant to my research. My goal was to understand teachers as individuals who have intimate experience with controversial questions in their classrooms. Qualitative methodology is appropriate for the study of classroom talk.

Classroom talk research began with the seminal studies of Barnes, Britton, and Rosen in 1969 and further by Barnes in 1976. Barnes’ research into the field of classroom talk, particularly using closed questions in whole class teaching, persuaded many teachers to think about their own classroom procedures from an investigative point of view (Edwards & Westgate, 1994). Creswell (2008) defined qualitative research as “an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem” (p. 15). Edwards and Westgate (1994) confirmed the use of qualitative methods in the examination of talk, equating the talk we observe as evidence of significance of meaning. Teachers’ perceptions of classroom talk, particularly, controversial questions, can shed light on relationships in the classroom and the interactions of students and teachers. Edwards and Westgate (1994) maintained that talk is a social act and necessary for us to make change happen. Through interviews with teachers, I was able to get their own personal reasons behind their actions. I used these interviews to allow the teachers to interpret their own actions justified by their own reasons, rather than conducting observations and interpreting the teachers’ actions according to my own possible researcher bias.
Qualitative Approach and Instrumentation

I used a grounded theory approach through interviews and focus groups integrating multiple teacher perspectives to describe various teacher experiences (Weiss, 1994). Interviews provided me with opportunities to establish rapport with numerous teachers, ask open-ended questions, and listen for unique language and other clues in teachers’ observations and explanations that could reveal distinct meanings in each participant’s situation. Interview questions included sociocultural information to aid in understanding the teacher’s milieu, including classroom and school climate and efforts to establish student-teacher relationships.

Focus groups provided me with the opportunity to listen to the interactions within the group of teachers, including issues about which they agreed or disagreed. This group interaction provided me with insight I would not have had the opportunity to discover through one-on-one interviews alone (Hatch, 2002). Other advantages to using focus groups include a focus on the central question of the study (Morgan, 1997), while also flexibility in the direction of the discussion allowing for more intense and more significant data (Byers & Wilcox, 1991). Finally, Hillebrandt (1979) found respondents had a sense of security in focus groups that promoted a willingness to better state their own attitudes, as opposed to the attitude of the researcher. This sense of willingness also encouraged more truthful and thoughtful responses from participants.

Vignettes are described by Finch (1978) as “short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond” (p. 105). Recent research in the use of vignettes has found them useful as an addition to individual interviews and within a focus group setting (Barter & Renold,
Vignettes, along with other approaches to qualitative data collection, serve several purposes in research. Vignettes can encourage personal connections with participants, elicit information about participants’ beliefs, explore issues that may be uncomfortable for participants, and compare various viewpoints between participants (Barter & Renold, 1999; Finch, 1978; Wade, 1999).

Vignettes may be presented in writing or in videos with the importance on practicality (Seguin & Ambrosio, 2002). Activities within content-specific vignettes used in research by Veal (2002) included:

- an introduction of setting;
- a description of the participants included in the vignette;
- a clarification of the problem;
- a description of the interacting dimensions found in the setting;
- the dialogue between the participants;
- a major event worthy of attention by the participants.

A number of researchers, (Barter & Renold, 1999; Neff, 1979; Sequin & Ambrosio, 2002; Wason, Polonsky, & Hyman, 2002) point to the importance of vignettes appearing realistic to the participants. Although vignettes may include examples of the writers’ true experiences, they avoid atypical characters and events, remaining somewhat mundane (Barter & Renold, 1999; Finch, 1978; Hughes, 1998). Vignettes should reflect
realistic issues that actually do occur or could occur in certain circumstances in the lives of the participants (Sequin & Ambrosio, 2002). Using previous research conducted by Barter and Renold (1999), Seguin and Ambrosia (2002), Veal (2002) and Wason, Polonsky, & Hyman (2002), I developed each vignette to include:

- an introduction of setting;
- descriptions of the participants in the vignette;
- clarification of the problem;
- a description of the interacting dimensions found in the setting;
- a dialogue between the participants;
- a major event worthy of attention by the participants;
- easily understood language and content;
- consistent details throughout the scenario;
- a situation ambiguous enough to allow various explanations;
- all of the variables I was interested in;
- careful wording to avoid influencing participants’ answers (see Appendix B).

Vignettes are also appropriate to use when exploring sensitive issues such as the controversial topics I explored with teachers. Neale (1999) discovered that participants found vignettes less threatening than talking directly about an experience and provided participants with greater control in their responses. Although little research has been done using vignettes in focus groups, Maclean’s (1999) research found very shy children voiced their opinions better when responding to vignettes as opposed to direct interview questions.
I used Noddings’ (2006) controversial topics as templates for the vignettes. Noddings described these topics as controversial, stated that they encourage critical thinking, and that they were of moral and social importance. The vignettes were written then reviewed and discussed with a group of teachers from my home school for clarification. Their suggestions to improve the vignettes included adding emotional elements, adding more terms adolescents would use, and including issues involving mental illness, sex, and fairness to reflect questions they had personally experienced. The final vignettes were modified according to these suggestions.

The instruments used to gather data for this study were various open-ended interview questions and vignettes designed to be both structured, yet flexible (Hatch, 2002). Structurally, I led the interview at predetermined times and places and recorded them with a video recorder. In terms of flexibility, the respondents were encouraged to remember past events and give responses to hypothetical situations that led to a wide range of discussions. Background questions established gender, age, years of experience, certification, and current subject being taught, in addition to questions regarding their schools and classroom milieus. The criteria for developing the vignettes were that they were easily understood, contained a controversial issue, and written so that the respondents were answering as themselves as opposed to answering as they believed a character in the vignette would respond. See Appendix B for a copy of the vignettes and Appendix C for interview questions that were used in the study.
Participants

Middle school teachers from my home school were chosen to participate in an informal pilot of the vignettes and focus group experience. Their comments and criticisms were essential to the improvement of the vignettes and interview process. The actual sample was a convenience sample of middle school teachers from five schools in central Ohio, chosen to participate in the focus groups or one-on-one interviews. Two teachers scheduled for a focus group interview elected not to participate in the study. The participants included 35 individuals. There were 8 males and 27 females. Their teaching experience ranged from two years to 27 years (see Table 2). Participants were recruited through personal and professional relationships. All of the participants consented to the interview voluntarily, and without compensation for their participation. The participant names have been changed throughout the dissertation and the tables.

The criteria for selection of participants included:

- teachers of middle grade students
- teachers currently teaching a core middle level subject of math, social studies (SS), science (SC), language arts (LA), or intervention specialists (Spec. Ed.) including Severe Learning Disabilities (SLD), Cognitive Disabilities (CD) and Emotional Disabilities(ED).

Participants were approached by superintendents, principals, other teachers, or friends and asked if they would be willing to participate in the study. The participants contacted me directly by phone or e-mail. Participants provided me with their informed consent according to Ashland University’s Human Subject procedures (see Appendix A).
### Table 2

**Teacher Responses to Interview Protocol Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School/Typology</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Yrs exp.</th>
<th>Licensure</th>
<th>Controversial Questions</th>
<th>Student-Teacher Relationship</th>
<th>Perceptions of Parents</th>
<th>Classroom Climate</th>
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<table>
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</table>

*Note. Participant names have been changed.*

ªDNA=Did not answer.
Data Collection Methods

Various methods were used to collect data for this study. One-on-one video-recorded interviews, video recorded focus groups, handwritten answers, and e-mails were all used to gather and store data. Other documents, such as school records, established school demographics. Responses to vignettes were the primary source of information gathered from all participants.

Two one-on-one interviews were conducted. Five focus groups were conducted, each consisting of three to five participants. Each interview and focus group event was between 30-60 minutes long, structured, and the video and audio were recorded. Twelve participants submitted their answers in writing. Questions in and out of the context of the vignettes were asked of the participants to discuss their responses to students’ controversial questions in the classroom. I defined the term controversial question for this study as any type of question that is debatable or causes an emotional response. The emotional responses associated with controversial questions may include embarrassment, indignation, anxiety, or fear from students, parents of students, or teachers. The controversial questions I focused on in my research were typically generated by students and of a real world nature.

I classified the responses to the questions from the interview protocol into categories of Student-Teacher Relationships, Parent Perception, and the Classroom Climate. Responses such as “friendly,” “nurturing,” and “helpful” were defined as positive. Responses that included terms of “uninviting,” “too big,” or “could be better” I defined as negative. I used the neutral classification for responses of “it depends,” “varies,” or when there was an equal number of positive and negative responses.
Data Analysis

The task of data analysis can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Merriam (1998) claimed that understanding the data requires consolidation and reduction of the information. Creswell (2008) described the phases of analysis as repetitive, moving between data collection, coding, and analysis simultaneously. Finally, Edwards and Westgate (1994) stated that specific to classroom talk, there is typically so much data to analyze it is imperative that researchers be discriminate in the information they record, transcribe, analyze, and publish.

To ensure an inclusive analysis of the data, I followed a comprehensive grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Patton (2002) stated that the initial phase in analyzing qualitative data is developing a code or indexing system. He recommended that after the interviews have been transcribed, the researcher should seek to identify codes and categories to classify and label emerging patterns in the data. I analyzed the codes simultaneously as I continued to collect data from individual and focus group interview transcripts, documents within the field, and the interview protocol, constantly comparing them (Charmaz, 2006).

Analysis of the transcribed interviews looked for words, phrases, or ideas that emerged from the respondents’ answers to one-on-one interview questions and focus group discussions. Glaser (1993) suggested that researchers ask themselves the following questions:

- What is the data studying?
- What category or what property of what category does this incident indicate?
- What is actually happening in the data?
- What is the basic social psychological process or social structural process in the action scene (p. 51)?
After the interviews were transcribed, I analyzed codes through open coding, lean coding, and in vivo coding. Open coding, the first step in grounded theory, occurs when the transcripts are read to identify appropriate categories by placing similar words, phrases, or ideas together (Gibbs, 2008). Creswell (2008) recommended the use of lean coding. The goal of lean coding is to avoid a large number of themes by using fewer codes associated with broad themes. Lean coding begins with listing all codes together, and grouping similar or redundant codes. Next, Creswell (2008) suggested circling specific words from participant quotes, called in vivo codes. In vivo codes use the exact words of the participants in the study instead of the researcher’s words. Through constant comparison and analysis of recently gathered data with previously gathered data, Merriam (1998) claimed the results of the data would be practical in size, yet still informative.

After this initial coding of the text, I looked at any relationships and connections to form categories and subcategories (Gibbs, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I used memos to organize my thoughts after interviews, track thoughts between interviews, and as memory markers for future interviews. I reviewed these memos to add to the current categories (Charmaz, 2006). I followed Merriam’s (1998) guidelines to determine the efficacy of formed categories by considering if:

- the categories reflected the purpose of the research,
- were exhaustive,
- were mutually exclusive,
- were sensitive to the reader describing the category, and
- were conceptually congruent.
Finally, through constant comparison of data, reflection of data, and narrowing of categories, I interpreted their meanings (Creswell, 2008).

Some of the vignettes elicited more thorough responses than other vignettes. Teachers were more apt to discuss the vignettes for Parenting, Making a Living, Learning and Self-Understanding, House and Home, and Other People over the vignettes for Animals and Nature and Advertising and Propaganda which many participants viewer as noncontroversial. The vignettes for Religion, War, and Gender brought about the most discussion, both positive and negative.

I chose to divide the participants of my research into two main attitudes. Upon review of the transcripts, I searched for phrases or comments that would indicate willingness or reluctance to having controversial discussions. “Willingness” included “I would lay it right out there in front” (Max) and “In my class, we talk about different types of prejudice, and I feel like it’s easy to talk about” (Nanci). Teachers that I deemed “reluctant” made more negative comments regarding their own willingness to participate in these discussions such as “I wouldn’t spend a lot of time on [the discussion], but I would let her parents know” and “I would just ignore [the comment]” (Sally). Through this simple divide, I had the freedom to explore each side of the topic separately, analyze participants’ responses, and then examine the resulting categories holistically.

In grounded theory research, constant comparison of data allows themes to evolve continually until theory begins to form. Figure 1 shows the changes that occurred between the initial coding and the resulting themes.
Figure 1. Process of coding from Initial Coding Results to Formed Categories to the Resulting themes.

**Initial Coding Results**
- Students’ own opinions
- Relate discussions to curriculum
- Students’ future plans
- Students’ voice
- Students’ academic, social, and moral growth
- Avoid contradicting parents’ views
- Never enough time
- Do not share personal opinions
- Do not share personal life events
- Avoid claiming an issue is right or wrong
- Avoid topics not included in curriculum
- Refer students to parents or guidance counselors

**Formed Categories**

**Willing Teachers:**
- Utilize teachable moments
- Encourage educationally relevant discussions
- Understand moral development of adolescents

**Reluctant Teachers:**
- Resent the lack of teaching time
- Feel uncomfortable discussing certain issues
- Use humor to avoid questions
- Refer students to others

**Resulting Themes**

**How are teachers empowered to have controversial discussions in their classroom?**
- Employ teachable moments
- Encourage educationally relevant discussions
- Understand moral development of adolescents

**What restraints do teachers perceive that prevent controversial discussions in the classroom?**
- The lack of time
  - Legitimacy of questions
    - Use of humor
    - Referrals to others
- Teacher comfort
In Chapter IV, I will examine all of these angles in an effort to complete a successful grounded theory as defined by Charmaz, (2006) by examining rich data, data that are detailed in description, focused on the incidents examined, and full in experiences.

**Researcher Bias**

Personally and professionally, I spent the majority of my adult years in central Ohio. The middle school where I teach is the only school district in which I have ever been employed, so I have not experienced many alternative ways of doing things. I became interested in controversial topics in the classroom having experienced first-hand these types of questions from my students. I became interested in the moral development of middle school students after reading Greene (1988), Noddings (1988, 1992, 1994, 1998, 2006), Simon (2001), and Palmer (1998). I personally believe that controversial questions in the classroom should be welcome and discussed.

I attempted to minimize researcher bias in a number of ways. By using vignettes more than direct interview questions, I was able to provide my participants with a variety of teaching scenarios. Although participants may have been uncomfortable with particular controversial categories, I made sure my participants knew that their responses were purely optional. I worked to develop a good rapport with my participants by being professional yet friendly, respectful yet probing (Seidman, 1998). Finally, good interviewing was a learning experience for me. I made a concerted effort to slow down and listen carefully to both the information my participants offered and information they neglected. Through practice, interview prompts, and developing additional probing
questions, I improved, but I understood that becoming a great interviewer took time. Bogdan and Biklen used notes and memos to reflect on interviews and consider how they may connect to broader issues (as cited in Merriam, 1989). For example, I wrote the following note which appeared next to a response to the Gender vignette: *She won’t talk about homosexuality in class, but she will one on one. Could be her way of supporting her students and remaining noncontroversial to her administrators?* Notes such as this and others provided additional insight that may have been lost otherwise.

Following Merriam’s (1998) requirements for qualitative research in lieu of quantitative validity and reliability, I employed researcher awareness, interaction between interviewer and participant, and vivid descriptions. Finally, I accomplished triangulation by considering answers to vignettes, my own notes and memos, and document analysis in the form of school and class schedules and demographic information regarding the locations of the schools in the study.

The teachers from my home school provided informal peer review of my data analysis and interpretations. They reviewed various categories and themes and replied verbally or in writing. The teachers from my home school appeared to be open and honest in their opinions frequently disagreeing with my view.

### Summary

The goal of this qualitative research study was to explore teachers’ perspectives regarding controversial questions in the classroom. This was accomplished by the use of one-on-one interviews, focus groups, researcher memos, and peer review of data. Various coding techniques and constant comparison of data led to the formation of categories. I
reviewed these categories for connections, reviewed memos, and continually compared
the data to previously gathered data and new data. Further analysis of the categories
including reflecting, narrowing categories, and further comparisons resulted in the final
themes that shed light into the reasons behind teachers’ reactions and responses to
students’ controversial questions. To minimize researcher bias, triangulation (responses
to vignettes, researcher memos, and peer review of data) was accomplished. The results
of this process were emergent themes that reflected the participants’ perceptions of
empowerment or restraint in responding to controversial questions in the middle school
classroom.
Presentation of Results Overview

Chapter III focused on the analysis of data and interpretation of categories into themes from interviews, focus groups, and memos. The information I sought in this research study was intended to elicit from teachers their own perceptions regarding how they answer students’ controversial questions in the middle school classroom. Previous research indicates that due to middle school students’ developmental levels and a lack of adequate character education programs, students may need a venue in which to be heard (Kohn, 1997; Perlstein, 2003; Powell, 2010). A classroom community in which the climate is positive and where questions may be asked and answered honestly and appropriately can add significantly to a student’s social, moral, and emotional well-being (Beane, 2005). The literature review also indicated the importance of the sociocultural perspective. The climate of the classroom, school, and community at large are also factors to take into consideration when researching student-teacher relationships (Davis, 2003; Noddings, 1988; Simon, 2001). How and what students and teachers talk about in a classroom is of significant value in any educational setting. Positive classroom talk can encourage further learning and promote a sense of self-confidence (Barnes, 1977, 1992).

Again, this study explored the following research questions:

1.) How do teachers react and respond to controversial questions in the classroom? The sub-questions for this question were as follows:

   a) How do the teachers interviewed view their relationships with students?

   b) How do the teachers interviewed describe their classroom climate?
c) How do the teachers interviewed think a parent would describe their school?

d) How do the teachers interviewed describe their community?

e) What experience do the teachers interviewed have with character education?

f) What do the teachers interviewed believe are the most difficult developmental characteristics for middle school students?

2.) From the teachers’ perspectives, why do teachers respond to controversial questions the way that they do?

   a) To what extent do teachers feel empowered to respond to controversial questions?

   b) What do teachers perceive to be the restraints on dealing with these questions?

During analysis of the data, I categorized participants into two types of teachers: teachers who were willing to have controversial discussions [Willing] and teachers who were reluctant to have controversial discussions [Reluctant]. I made this distinction by reviewing the transcripts for positive and negative statements from teachers. Teachers that I deemed “Reluctant” made more comments of a negative nature regarding their own willingness to participate in controversial discussions. From my sample of 35 participants, 13 (37%) were “Willing” teachers, and 22 (63%) were “Reluctant” teachers. The remainder of the chapter will present data that either differentiate or do not differentiate between Willing and Reluctant teachers.
Similarities between Willing and Reluctant Teachers

The following research questions were answered directly by way of the interview protocol or within the discussions that occurred around the vignettes. The research participants’ names are pseudonyms to retain anonymity. I have included these pseudonyms, along with the vignette that they were responding to if applicable.

Similarity #1: How Teachers View their Relationships with their Students

When teachers were asked how a student would describe them as their teacher, both Willing and Reluctant teachers were more positive than negative using words like, fair, nice, giving, caring, energetic, nurturing, good listener, easy going, enthusiastic, dedicated, consistent, high expectations, firm, driven, relaxed, understanding, organized, smart, goofy, insightful, passionate, focused yet flexible, etc. Many of the teachers thought their students would describe them in a combination that included fun and caring, yet firm or strict when it came to expectations. Willing and Reluctant teachers described their relationships with their students as follows:

I think they’d say that I care about them a lot. I think they’d say that I’m fair and that I teach in an interesting way. [Marie]

Sometimes I will expect more out of you. I will provide to you what you need to help you grow. [Max, Learning and Self-Understanding]

My students know I want everyone to be successful. [Marshal, Learning and Self Understanding]
I talk to them at the beginning of the year and let them know that not everything is the same for everyone in every situation. Not everything will be the same in discipline, in education, etc. It depends on the situation, but I will be fair.

[Max, Learning and Self-Understanding]

When teachers described their relationships with students, it was evident they played a variety of roles in students’ lives, by saying things such as, “they know I am their biggest cheerleader,” “they hug me,” “I will push them to do their best and they appreciate it,” “I am their teacher with a side of counselor, they can tell me anything.”

**Student-teacher relationships are important to teachers.**

I think I really have a good relationship with the majority. When I don’t, when I have a kid that stumps me, it bugs me. It bothers me a lot and I recognize that not every kid is going to like me and not everyone is going to respond well to me, but I don’t want something that I’m doing to get in the way of a student feeling comfortable in my class…. There are so many kids that have so many things going on in their lives right now. I want my class to be a place where they don’t have to worry about that kind of stuff. They don’t have to worry about being picked on by the teacher or being humiliated or embarrassed or any of those things. I don’t want that to ever happen in my classroom. I want them to feel safe here and I want them to learn here. And I want them to feel safe with each other and that’s even tougher for me. So if I find that there’s a student that’s not responding to me, that gets to me and I am challenged by that and I work with that, and sometimes I’m successful and sometimes I’m not. I would say that I
have a good relationship with almost all of them. They feel comfortable with me. They listen to me. They try to do their best for me. I know I can’t please everybody, I just want them to know that I hear them and I’ll do the best I can.

[Marie]

**Teachers know relationships are important to students.**

Some kids don’t have a father figure to love and care [for] and support them. They don’t get that at home so they might feel closer to you, feel like you could be that person in their life. [Adam]

I say “it sounds like you want to talk about something, what’s on your mind.” It’s really about listening to them because a lot of times when they ask a question like that they really want to talk about something and that’s the only way they know to start that conversation is to ask you that question. [Marie]

**Helpfulness**

Teachers believe that part of their job as teachers is to be a helpful resource to students. Teachers can prevent problems before they occur and will offer suggestions to students encountering a problem.

I like to tell students that they haven’t done anything wrong because they haven’t been given the opportunity to do something wrong. Maybe we’re doing you a favor by preventing some behavior that would be otherwise. [Max, Other People]

I had a situation the other day where I said that a lot of times when I have a situation where I’m frustrated I take a look at what I can do to make the situation
better…. That’s the only thing you have control over is yourself and so look at what you can do to make the situation better in that room…. So bring up what you can do within you. Can you be less timid? Can you get your homework done more? Can you raise your hand more? Can you do something that makes that class better? [Marie]

I think that one of the things that is important for the kids is to be heard. You don’t have to do anything. They need to know that somebody thinks they matter. That’s one of the things that I do best is I want to make sure that they know they matter in my classroom. If they feel forgotten, if they feel that’s not happening, then that’s something I want to change. [Marie]

**Similarity #2: How Teachers Describe Their Classroom**

The climate of a classroom, how the classroom “feels” to the student, is the environment created by teachers and administrators to maximize student achievement and personal growth. Teachers described how they believed their students would describe their classroom as interactive, comfortable, high energy, laid back, organized, flexible, structured, busy, etc. The majority of teachers believed their classroom climate was positive with a few comments about student boredom and classroom discipline.

I think we’re fortunate to be on this team. This is a positive team to be on. We support kids and we talk about a lot of different issues with kids and we feel comfortable with it…we put a lot of effort into building that so that now we don’t have a lot of kids going home and hating things at school and twisting things around that happen in our classroom. [Vickie, Learning and Self-Understanding]
I have my safe space signs on the board and anytime this issue comes up as a negative like “that’s gay” or something, I always talk to them about why it’s important to me that they not say that in my classroom. I say I can’t control what you do outside of the classroom, but this is a safe space and no one is going to use that term in here and here’s why. [Marie]

Similarity #3: How Teachers Describe their Community

As previously described in Chapter III, all of the participants in this study were teachers in central Ohio school districts. Most of the teachers described their school communities as economically diverse while culturally homogeneous. Demographically, all five communities would be considered lower to upper middle-class, yet according to the Ohio Department of Education Free and Reduced Price lunch statistics, the schools range from 6.78% to 30.43%. The Typology Code Designations from Ohio Department of Education ranges from a 2, classified as “Rural/agricultural-small student population, low poverty, low to moderate median income” to a 7, classified as “Urban/Suburban-very high median income, very low poverty. Some teachers commented on their community’s reluctance to pass levies but its increasingly higher expectations for quality education. A couple of teachers pointed out that their school no longer services only the students in their community due to the transience of many open-enrolled students.
Similarity #4: What Experience Do Teachers Have with Character Education?

There are numerous character education programs available to schools. Many times, the administrators or guidance counselors are in charge of choosing an affordable program they believe the teachers will promote and the students will accept.

We’ve done FISH philosophy and we’ve also done Rachel’s Challenge. So I will refer to those, like hey, change your attitude. If you’re looking for something, you’re going to find it, and if you think you’re going to have a crappy day, you will. If they have a positive attitude, it will spill over into other areas of their day.

[Miranda, Other People]

“A World of Difference” is the coolest program. It was created by the anti-Defamation Group and a number of people were trained as facilitators throughout Ohio and across the country, but unfortunately we don’t do it here. [Marie]

I’m not a fan of character education so I don’t do things although I’m directed to. There are times when we are told to have the students go through their agendas and look at their wonderful habits that are in their agenda for today. I never do that because I’ve asked the students, “Okay guys, when you hear an announcement and they say here’s the character education tip of the day, how do you respond to that?” They think it’s stupid…. We did it wrong for a long time. It’s being forced, and that’s not the way kids learn best. [Marie]

One year we put some character traits up on the board and they had to pick someone that had the character and write about them. [Ellen, as she rolls her eyes]

Canned programs do not work. [Chris]
Many teachers believe the only authentic way to teach character education is by modeling it every day. Some teachers believe that similar to the school breakfast program, character education should be available at home, but for many students it is not happening. Taking advantage of teachable moments, current events, meaningful dialogue, and classroom conversations were suggested as alternatives to mini-lessons with morals during the morning announcements.

Literature gives the opportunity for choices and you can use a character to show a non-example or an example of what not to do. Use it as a cautionary tale for the student to learn from. [Miranda, Religion]

**Differences Between Willing and Reluctant Teachers**

**Difference #1: Gender**

In this sample, women teachers were more likely than men to be willing to discuss controversial topics in class. Although the participant sample is too small to generalize, it is noteworthy that 11 of 27 (41%) of the female teachers were Willing teachers, whereas only 2 of 8 (25%) of the males were Willing teachers.

**Difference #2: How Teachers Believe Parents Would Describe their School**

Most of the teachers interviewed described the physical aspects of their school in terms of size (always too big), cleanliness, and safety.

In general, people like this school. It’s clean, it’s new, and it’s bright. I think that they feel that their kids are going to a good middle school. I think you have the occasional
parent that is afraid of this time period and has one bad experience that colors everything… and they don’t see it in perspective. I think that parents for the most part feel that teachers get back to them; they respond well, talk respectfully to them, and have good communication. [Marie]

In terms of parent communication, some teachers believed their school was open and available to parents, although a few teachers believed parents saw their school as uninviting, mainly due to poor communication. Many teachers claimed that it really depended on the parents and their own experiences with the teachers and administrators at the school.

You would think that the parents would recognize that you have their kid’s best interest in mind. [Kevin, Learning and Self-Understanding]

I tell you, our sixth grade class has a superior reputation…parents come back to us and tell us how much they appreciate us. Three out of the four of us have a website and I put everything online. I even put my spelling packets online and they think we are really caring and we have a really good team. [Ellen]

The majority of all teachers perceived parental perceptions of their school as positive (19 of 35, or 54%). Typologies of schools [1-7] as determined by Ohio Department of Education (2007) include:

1-Rural/agricultural - high poverty, low median income
2-Rural/agricultural - small student population, low poverty, low to moderate median income
3-Rural/Small Town - moderate to high median income
4-Urban - low median income, high poverty
5-Major Urban - very high poverty
6-Urban/Suburban - high median income
7-Urban/Suburban - very high median income, very low poverty

However, fewer than half (3 of 7) of School A teachers perceived positive parental perceptions, whereas 60% (12 of 20) of School B teachers were positive about parental perceptions (see Table 3).

Among Willing teachers, 69% (9 of 13) had a positive view of parental perception of their school. Among Reluctant teachers, only 50% (11 of 22) had a positive view of parental perception. This suggests a connection between Willing teachers and their perception that parents positively perceive their school. Again, a larger sample size is needed to test this relationship.
Table 3  

*Teachers’ Perceptions of Parental Perceptions of Their Schools*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School/Typology&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>DNA</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A/2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B/3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C/7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D/3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E/6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Ohio Department of Education, Typology of Ohio School Districts, 2007

**Difference #3: Grade Bands**

Grade bands refer to the division of grade levels or specialties for teacher licensure as defined by the Ohio Department of Education. Teachers in this sample licensed for K-12, K-8 (1), K-9 (1), 1-8, 4-9, 7-12, and Special Education showed differences in the percentage of Willing and Reluctant teachers. Although my sample size is not large enough to be of wide-spread influence, half of the teachers in both the 4-9 grade band and Special Education were Willing teachers, compared to 37% for the whole sample. Table 4 reflects the teacher’s licensure grade band, however it does not indicate if the teacher is currently teaching sixth, seventh, or 8<sup>th</sup> grade. More investigation is needed to test this relationship.
Table 4

Willing and Reluctant Teachers by Grade Band

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Bands</th>
<th>Reluctant</th>
<th>Willing</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% Willing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-8, 1-8, K-9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spec. Ed.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Difference #4: Years of Experience

In this limited sample, Reluctant teachers had slightly more years of teaching experience. Willing teachers (n = 13) had a mean of 8.23 years of teaching experience, whereas Reluctant teachers (n = 22) had a mean of 10.86 years of teaching experience.

All of the differences between Willing teachers and Reluctant teachers described above (gender, teacher’s perceptions of parents by school, grade bands, and years of experience) are noteworthy, but carries less importance due to the small sample size. The following sections are additional differences that surfaced during the discussions surrounding the vignettes.
Difference #5: What Do Teachers Believe Are the Most Difficult Developmental Characteristics for Middle School Students?

When asked which developmental characteristics are the most difficult ones for middle school students, 40% (14 of 35) of the combined Willing and Reluctant teachers responded in terms of moral development. I decided moral development included responses such as responsibility for actions, fairness, acceptance of diversity, empathy, tolerance, and caring. Table 5 shows nine of the 13 (69%) Willing teachers responded in terms of moral development, however only five out of 22 (23%) of Reluctant teachers did so.

Thirty-four percent (12 out of 35) of the combined Willing and Reluctant teachers interviewed believed that students struggle most with social issues, which I identified as fitting in, belonging, peer pressure, relationships, and being accepted. The remaining 26% (9 out of 35) of teachers believed that emotional or physical characteristics were most difficult characteristics for middle school students, did not answer the questions, or answered in a way I was not able to classify under the developmental characteristics of emotional, social, moral, cognitive, and physical.

I don’t think this is a characteristic, but I think the imaginary audience students believe is around them at this age, where they think that all eyes are on them all the time. This goes along hand-and-hand with their lack of self-confidence. They don’t know how to see things in perspective and have the confidence to rise above that. [Marie, in regard to adolescent social development]
Table 5

*Teachers’ Beliefs about the Most Difficult Developmental Problems Faced by Middle School Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developmental Characteristic/Problem</th>
<th>Whole Sample of Teachers</th>
<th>Willing Teachers</th>
<th>Reluctant Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>N=14</td>
<td>N=9</td>
<td>N=5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.e., responsibility for actions, fairness, acceptance of diversity, empathy, tolerance, and caring</td>
<td>(40%)</td>
<td>(69%)</td>
<td>(23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>N=12</td>
<td>N=3</td>
<td>N=9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.e., fitting in, belonging, peer pressure, relationships, and being accepted</td>
<td>(34%)</td>
<td>(23%)</td>
<td>(41%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional, Physical, No Response, or Other</td>
<td>N=9</td>
<td>N=1</td>
<td>N=8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(26%)</td>
<td>(8%)</td>
<td>(36%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL 35 13 22

(100%) (100%) (100%)

**Emerging Themes from Discussion of Vignettes Introduction**

The following are themes that emerged from using the vignettes and the discussions surrounding them. Many teachers not only answered the vignette scenario
hypothetically or related their experiences, but also expounded on the situations, offering additional insights.

This research revealed that Willing teachers use teachable moments because they understand their value to students. Sometimes teachers will welcome a break in the scheduled curriculum as much as the students do, choosing to embrace the teachable moment and discuss the topic immediately. At other times, teachers will integrate the topic into a future lesson or an organized debate. Willing teachers encourage educationally relevant discussions and understand that students need the opportunity to be heard. Willing teachers are also aware of students’ struggles through moral development, discovering how they fit in or choosing right over wrong, that can be tackled through classroom discussions.

Reluctant teachers are uncomfortable discussing controversial issues. Sometimes, they simply understand their influence on students and do not want to sway students’ views or contradict the views of their parents. To avoid these discussions, some teachers redirect the topic to another more acceptable topic or refocus to a previous topic.

Teachers also may use humor by making jokes or pretending not to understand the students’ questions. Reluctant teachers may also avoid discussions by referring students to their parents or the school guidance counselor.

Both sets of teachers mentioned the lack of time as an issue of concern. The current time constraints for teachers are unprecedented in the profession. The lack of time frustrates teachers and can affect the students’ classroom experience. Reluctant and Willing teachers viewed the lack of time differently. Reluctant teachers used the lack of time as a justification not to have controversial discussions. Willing teachers claimed
never to have enough time to cover the mandated curriculum anyway, so they were willing to have these conversations because they believed they were valuable to students.

Willing Teachers

Theme #1: Teachable moments.

In my code teachable moments, I included participants’ comments of such things as topics that students “bring up,” “real world” issues, and “letting them talk it out.” Understanding the value of teachable moments and being flexible enough to use them were ways that Willing teachers were able to justify discussions of a controversial nature in their classrooms.

I teach math, so there’s not a lot of controversy goin’ on, but I’m not afraid to bring up religion and talk about it and I’ll tell them where my votes are and my faith, and I tell them they don’t have to believe something just because I do.

[Max, Religion]

Let’s research it and figure it out! We teach the research skills so we may as well use real world events that come up in class. [Nancy, War]

My first year I tried to stay away from this conversation because you have to deal with the parents and try to explain how I feel about this. Last year it came up and I let them talk it out. I let the conversation go from there and it was fine. [Vickie, Religion]
Theme #2: Educationally Relevant Discussions

Many Willing teachers claimed that as long as they can relate the topic back to education, they feel they can justify taking time away from the planned curriculum and successfully defend this decision to parents.

I refuse to teach to one or two crazy parents. I’m not going to let them tell me what to say. Do I have an education, and if I do, then I’m going to say it, and I just don’t believe I’m going to have a massive uprising. I might have a few crazy parents and I will be able to fend them off, and if I can’t, then something is wrong; then it’s not my fault, it’s not my problem. [Stephanie]

We also talk about how every culture has a creation story and you talk about it as literature, as metaphorical, not as literal interpretation. I’ve had parents question that and say, “Well, this is our faith and this is what we believe, and how dare you say that this is just a story?” But if I can relate it back to education, I feel okay with it. [Miranda, Religion]

I get more parent e-mails when I’m teaching about Christianity than about Islam. Our indicators are to look at the formation of Christianity and how that affected history. I’m contacted by a lot more parents during that study than Islam. And most of it is a concern that says this isn’t what our church teaches, and then I have to explain that we’re looking at this from history. We’re talking about only the Catholic church at this time. [Connie, Religion]

If you are interested or feel strongly, maybe you should do research to back up what you believe. [Macy, Religion]
I would ask the students to write down how they feel. I would work this into a
debate, a teaching moment where everyone gets a say—but also say it is only
their opinion. [Chris, War]

Theme #3: Understanding Moral Developmental of Adolescents

Both Willing and Reluctant teachers understood that middle school students are
experiencing a difficult adjustment period in their lives and many times feel as though
they have little control. Willing teachers however, gave more examples of moral
development as being the most difficult developmental area for adolescents.

Sometimes they just need to unload. That’s all it is. Sometimes that is all I’d do.
That’s a really great technique because they need somebody to listen to them, but
they don’t necessarily need somebody to do something about it. [Marie]

Middle school students don’t think before they act. Some of the things we try to
teach them is that there are repercussions to their actions. They wouldn’t think
that there would be dead guppies and crying girls or chaos. Typically, what we
see is that it is a learning experience and the kids do feel awful later. That usually
lasts about a week or so, but again, you take it for what it is and it is a learning
experience. [Connie, Animals]

Summary of the Extent that Teachers Feel Empowered to Respond to Controversial
Questions

To summarize the above section, Willing teachers understand that even the best
laid plans are never as valuable as a student-initiated discussion of a controversial nature.
Teachable moments are only valuable at that moment, when the students are engaged, curious, and willing to participate. A well-rounded teacher is able to make connections between controversial questions and academic content. Having a discussion of a controversial nature that includes educationally relevant material helps students make connections between real world issues and academics, and assures parents and administration that classroom time is not being “wasted,” but enhanced. Willing teachers understand that as middle school students mature they begin to question how and why our world works the way it does and their own significance. Moral questions such as the meaning of life, life after death, the difference between faith, facts, and beliefs are all questions that adolescents begin to ponder. Willing teachers know that understanding can come from the freedom to discuss these issues.

**Reluctant Teachers**

**Theme #4: The lack of time.**

Both Willing and Reluctant teachers argued there is never enough time in a school day to cover mandated material, not to mention “extra” conversations. However, the difference between the teachers was that an overwhelming number of Reluctant teachers used the lack of time as a reason to avoid controversial discussions. Willing teachers believed they were already behind so they should take advantage of a teachable moment to discuss a topic of interest to the students. Reluctant teachers were also more concerned with the legitimacy of questions from students and inquired about the student’s intent. A Willing teacher explained time constraints:
I don’t care about whether the world ends in 2012, but if I find out that it continues to be an issue and if we have time someday, I might bring this up again. Or if it’s important or relevant to something we’re doing or if it’s really important to them, I’ll go with that. Other times, I say guys that’s really interesting but we just don’t have time and that’s too bad because I would love to have time. [Marie, War]

The following are examples of time constraints from Reluctant teachers:

We only have this much time. This is not about math. We only have this much time. If you want to have this discussion, we’ll find a time to have it later. We’ll talk about it then. We’ll talk about it next month maybe. [Sally, Religion]

It might be because they see us as the teacher that has to get things done and not necessarily focused on everything else in the world. We must get this done. This is what we’re going to do. They might feel that time crunch from me. So many things come up and we don’t have the time to have the huge discussion right now. [Carla, War]

I do 50 minutes’ worth of work every 40 minutes so we don’t really have 20 minutes of free time ever. They probably don’t get to connect with the real world in my class. There would never be the free time for this to even come up. [Ellen, War]

I guess you could take the time out and talk about why we have rules and why do we have guidelines and why do we have laws and expectations. I just don’t see
this as an important discussion with our limited amount of time in class

anyway. [Marshal, Other People]

Why are we at war in Iraq? I could see myself saying we’re not talking about this
good now, we’ve got 55 minutes; pass it on to another teacher. You know what,
that’s a great question. Maybe you can discuss that in another one of your classes.

[Robert, War]

**Sub-theme: Legitimacy of questions**

Sometimes they just make stuff up to take up class, so I would just ignore it.

[Sally, Gender]

It depends on the conversation. Like if it continues to go off task then, like they
start with one topic, then switch to a complete different one, then they get further
and further away from what we’re doing, you gotta nip that in the bud and get
back to teaching.[Marshal, Other People]

If there’s time in class I would want to know why Susan is taking this
stance….why is she coming up with this statement? Why all of a sudden she’s
become so political. So it would be a matter of trying to figure out Susan’s angle
on why she’s bringing this up all of a sudden. [Robert, War]

**The Use of Humor**

Some Reluctant teachers used humor to avoid answering students’ controversial
questions.

I’d probably say something like “we like them better.” I mean, honestly,
everything is a joke with me. That shuts them up long enough I can walk away. I
refuse to be intimidated by an 11-year-old. [Ellen, Learning and Self-
Understanding]

Someone may say, “That’s gay,” so I say “oh, so it’s happy.” They say, “I didn’t say happy.” “Yes, you did. Gay means happy.” Or if they say “fag,” I say “one of those sticks or a cigarette?” Showing how ridiculous to be using terms that they don’t understand or even know what they’re saying I tell them when you’re talking about things like that you don’t realize who you’re hurting around you.

[Sally-Gender]
I would probably say TMI (too much information) and laugh it off and keep going. [Ellen]

I would say ‘The world’s going to end a lot sooner for some of you unless you get back to work!’ [Phillip, War]

But I’m surprised Sarah’s in school today. She sounds like a “part-timer.” I’d probably make some comment like I’m glad you showed up today. [Ellen, Making a Living]

They are first looking out for everyone’s safety. The hall is too crowded when both sixth graders and eighth graders are in it. Besides, you might step on one and squish them. [Phillip, Other People]

**Referrals to Others**

Reluctant teachers most often referred students to their parents, but also used guidance counselors and even other teachers to avoid answering questions.

I would acknowledge the question, but I wouldn’t spend a lot of time on it. I would call her parents though. [Sally, Religion]
I personally believe in creation and you need to check with your parents to see what their belief in your home is…. I don’t believe this is something we need to get into in this class. I think this is too controversial for the classroom…. I think she needs to go home and read her Bible or ask her pastor, or if she wants to go home and ask her parents, then I think that’s fine, but I’m not going to get into this in my classroom. [Ellen, Religion]

I think what’s difficult for me is that my wife is a youth pastor and we’re very involved in the community so most of the kids have seen me at the church, so they know or have a good idea what my beliefs are. It hasn’t come up for discussion in class, but if it did come up I wouldn’t share what I believe or why I believe what I do. I would encourage the kids to speak with their parents about it or to seek and search for themselves. I am a teacher here and there are guidelines I have to follow. I have to follow the rule of separation of church and state, but in the church we share faith and Christianity. [Adam, Religion]

Why don’t you go home and Google that? [Ellen, War]

I would tell her to talk to her parents, that religion is very personal and I wouldn’t want to influence her with my belief system. I do believe in the separation of church and state. [Heather, Religion]

This is serious, so I would intervene with the students, would contact parents, and ask the counselor to be involved. This is a difficult issue, especially with girls. [Mandy, Advertising and Propaganda]
Theme #5: Teacher Comfort

Reluctant teachers have varying ideas of what issues are appropriate for discussion among middle school students. A teacher’s comfort level in regard to the questions students ask is an overwhelming factor in whether or not that question gets time, attention, or a referral to others. Reluctant teachers were also less familiar with the moral development of adolescents than Willing teachers.

For my class studying the Greeks and Romans, you don’t want to touch on homosexuality or bisexuality…. couple of videos say the troops are ready for war and they have women that come in and service them…. It’s something that really isn’t appropriate for their level. There are times when I’ve forgotten to fast-forward it and that was awkward. [Kristen, Gender]

I didn’t know about all that (sex) stuff at that age and I don’t want to expose them to what I don’t think they can handle. I want to save their childhood, be a kid and not have to worry about S.T.D.s. [Betty]

I don’t think these kids know that those are the type of things we don’t talk about in school. Everyone has their beliefs and a lot of things come up in science like genetics and cloning issues and all that sort of thing, but they aren’t school appropriate. [Bob, Religion]

My job as a teacher is to give accurate information. It’s not a subjective thing. [Kyle]

I would stay away from the right vs. wrong thing again. [Jessie, Other People]

I have personal beliefs (regarding homosexuality), but I don’t believe this is the place to discuss it. I would probably sidestep this issue and talk about name-
calling and bullying and how we have to accept people for who they are….I don’t think this is the place to discuss it. [Ellen, Gender]

I try to get into how nature passes on traits and obviously in history this gene and that gene, but I don’t get into that we came from monkeys or anything like that or to say that science has proved this or that or anything like that. [Bob, Religion]

This is a Christianity discussion and I would be careful when I open it up. [Sally, Religion]

It’s hard for me, personally. I know these students were most likely gay, but I don’t know how much I am allowed to be supportive of them. [Nancy, Gender]

I won’t tell them because I don’t want to influence their opinion. You go to the voting booth and it’s private. Since nobody else knows, it’s also private here. [Jackie, Religion]

I had a student ask me (after studying the five main religions) which religion is the right one? I did not answer, but told him to discuss it with his parents. [Sarah, Religion]

Most children adopt the opinions of their parents when they still live at home. They generally change to mirror opinions of their peers as they get older. Telling them not to adopt their parents’ opinions could lead to issues with a parent. [Alexis, War]

I would simply try to address the gay conversation as a name-calling situation and this is not acceptable. I would also try to reiterate that we are all entitled to our own opinions and thoughts, but school is not the time or place for this conversation. [Mandy, Gender]
Abortion and also politics, but not just because of my personal beliefs, but I think if I talk to students about a topic I should be credible enough that I can provide insight and, personally, I don’t think I know enough to be a credible voice. [Miranda, Religion]

Religion, we did a thing about what questions science can and can’t answer and if a question about religion does come up, we talk about how in science we stick to the facts and what can and cannot be proven and tested, and religion is more of a belief and a faith issue rather than a fact issue. I always try to steer more toward the facts and religion is not. [Suzy, Religion]

I think that I’m only uncomfortable when they ask me what my own personal religious beliefs are. [Connie, Religion]

I don’t respond when students start delving into my family, personal things. I don’t want that to be a conversation of the class. Sexual subjects are off limits also. Allow gay people to be what they are, but leave it at that; no discussion necessary. [Kevin, Gender]

I wouldn’t answer if a student said, “Well, you and your husband were together a long time before you got married.” “Did you guys have sex?” I would say, “You know, guys, there’s some things I need to share with you and some things I don’t need to share with you. Why do you need to know?” [Marie]

Well, I think anything personal that you discuss with your students is different than a normal relationship anyway. You can be friendly with your students, but you’re still the teacher so there is a definite bottom line that you have to have.

[Connie]
That is what comes up in class, but you have those discussions and both sides of the possibility around the issue or just allowing multiple opinions, but you never take a personal stance. [Max, Religion]

I just tell them that’s my own personal private belief and I don’t really share that in the classroom. It’s not really appropriate for me to share it in the classroom because we’re studying history and we’re studying religion from a historical viewpoint and how it has affected history so my personal beliefs really shouldn’t play into any of that. I don’t want to influence them one way or another. [Connie, Religion]

I don’t think any eighth grader has a strong political viewpoint. Again, I would dance around both sides, but keep my own opinions about those things controversial to myself. [Marshal, Religion]

**Summary of Teachers’ Perceptions of the Restraints on Dealing with Controversial Questions**

To summarize the above section, the lack of time affects all teachers, both Willing and Reluctant, but Reluctant teachers tend to use the lack of time as a self-imposed restraint for answering questions. Reluctant teachers were also cautious about wasting class time. Consequently, they questioned the legitimacy of student questions more than Willing teachers. Reluctant teachers used humor to avoid student questions, and they referred students to others. Most of the time Reluctant teachers referred students to their parents. Reluctant teachers use a more narrow range of their own comfort level to decide which controversial questions to address and which questions to avoid.
Success Stories

Willing teachers have had experience with and have seen the benefits from controversial discussions in the classroom, finding that their value to students is worth the time. Two quotes particularly illustrated how students benefitted from the teacher’s willingness to discuss controversial topics with them.

A student asked me what I thought of a popular reality TV person who is frequently seen doing drugs and alcohol and in sexual situations by the television audience. The class ended up having a great discussion about how we see ourselves and how we want others to see us. I didn't even say much, but I let the kids talk it out and it was amazing. They said it would be awful if this person was related to them! It was definitely a case of kids getting some good insight and being reminded that what they do now will always be a part of them. Sometimes kids just want an adult to listen to their opinions and maybe even agree with them. Yes, I had a different activity planned for this time, but this discussion was well worth it. [Connie]

I engage them well in conversation. It’s something that I do well. You do character education in your relationship with someone. I talked about integrity today but I did it in a different way. I had a conversation with a young woman who had been harassed by a young man. She chose to speak to me about it and we talked about her own integrity and about her own dealing of the situation. That’s character education. [Marie]
Description of Themes Summary

Willing teachers use teachable moments and are willing to discuss any subject they can link back to education and some subjects that cannot. Willing teachers were more likely than Reluctant teachers to understand the difficulty and importance of moral development for middle school students.

Theme #1: Teachable Moments

Willing teachers were prepared to forego the schedule for the day and forge into uncharted waters. Willing teachers understood the value of teachable moments: moments that are unplanned, that may or may not follow the curriculum, yet are still valuable to the student’s well-roundedness.

Theme #2: Educationally Relevant Discussions

Teachers who could weave controversial questions into discussions that were educationally relevant were more apt to have these discussions. Some teachers felt comfortable with controversial questions in their classroom by steering the discussion to any academic subject.

Theme #3: Moral Development

Willing teachers understood that moral development is of particular importance when it comes to encouraging the development of relationships between teachers and middle school students. Reluctant teachers referred less to the moral development of adolescents as being the most difficult developmental issue for middle school students.
Two of the themes, lack of time and low comfort level, were reasons Reluctant teachers gave for not participating in discussions in the classroom. To avoid controversial questions in the classroom, these teachers cited redirection with or without humor and referring students to other people.

**Theme #4: Lack of Time**

Teachers never have enough time. Many Reluctant teachers did not feel as though they had enough time to spare on unplanned or non-curriculum-related discussions. In a single day, teachers can answer to students, parents, fellow teachers, principals, administrative personnel, school board of education members, a superintendent and community members, all of whom could be in one way or another in control of a teacher’s time. In addition to the amount of time during the school day that is taken by duties, team meetings, conferences, department meetings, student mediations, and class preparation (not to mention actual content teaching), teachers must also change hats frequently. The varying and demanding roles teachers play leave little time for unplanned, off-topic discussions.

**Theme #5: Teacher Comfort**

Teachers who avoided discussing controversial questions in the classroom had varying degrees of what they believed were appropriate topics of conversation and those that were not. Although many teachers were willing to discuss a variety of controversial issues, one theme that emerged in the area of comfort were issues of a personal nature to
the teacher. Teachers were many times willing to develop relationships with students.

Nevertheless, many still maintained a degree of formality.
Summary of Findings and Implications

In this final chapter I discuss the research findings and implications for teachers, experts in adolescent development, and education researchers. Initially, I discuss the findings of the study concerning the sociocultural perspective, then a summary of the research question findings. Then, I discuss the emerging framework, the benefits of using vignettes in research, the implications for the education field, and the need for further research into controversial questions in the classroom.

The purpose of this study was to discover teachers’ perspectives of how and why they react and respond to controversial questions in the middle school classroom. My participant sample included 35 teachers from five different middle schools in Ohio. Employing grounded theory research methods, I collected data from interviews and focus groups, and I used my memos to organize my thoughts and ideas.

By reviewing the teachers’ responses to research questions and vignettes as positive or negative, I classified each teacher as Willing or Reluctant to discuss controversial questions in the classroom. The major differences that emerged from participant responses included

- Willing teachers used teachable moments.
- Willing teachers related controversial discussions to educationally relevant material more often than Reluctant teachers.
• Willing teachers identified the moral development of adolescents as the most difficult developmental issue more often than Reluctant teachers.

• The lack of time was an issue for both Willing and Reluctant teachers, but in different ways.

• Reluctant teachers, more often than Willing teachers, remarked that they were uncomfortable answering certain questions.

Reluctant teachers were more likely to question the legitimacy of student questions and to use humor and referrals as a way to avoid such questions than Willing teachers.

Sociocultural Perspective

Willing and Reluctant teachers agreed on most of the sociocultural aspects that would contribute to a positive student-teacher relationship. Sociocultural perspective claims that one cannot look at the actions in a classroom and view them as isolated events. Events in a classroom are contingent on the relationships within the school, the school climate, the reputation of the school through the eyes of the parents, community support, and the socioeconomic status of the school. Sociocultural approach accepts the influence of the classroom, the school, the community, etc., on the student-teacher relationship, all of which are dictated through societal norms (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Davis, 2003; DeVries & Zan, 1996; Goldstein, 1999; Oldfather & Dahl, 1994; Wells, 1996).

As I designed this study, I was especially interested in evidence of positive student-teacher relationships through a sociocultural perspective by way of discussions of
a controversial nature in the classroom. I anticipated that Willing teachers would be more likely than Reluctant teachers to speak positively about their education milieus. However, the data failed to show differences between the milieus of Willing and Reluctant teachers.

- All of the teachers viewed their relationships with their students as positive.
- All of the teachers described their classroom climates as positive.
- Most of the teachers thought their students’ parents would describe their schools positively.
- The teachers described their community positively.
- The schools had similar percentages of students who qualified for free and reduced lunches.

To be consistent with sociocultural perspective, participants would have responded positively to their school climate, classroom climate, and their relationships with students and, in addition, all of the participant teachers would have been Willing. However, only 37% of all of the participants were Willing and 63% were Reluctant. This may be because I relied on teachers’ perceptions of their students’ educational milieus. Page (1987) found that when teachers spoke for their students, they had a tendency to consider other variables, such as social characteristics and academic status, when these variables were actually irrelevant to the questions. I may have had different findings had I directly observed the teachers’, students’, or parents’ actions in regard to their school, classroom, or teachers (Simon, 2001).

Simon (2001) had the opportunity to observe directly the interactions between students and teachers as she spent nearly four weeks in approximately 18 different
teachers’ classrooms. I did not do direct observations. Instead, I used the vignettes to help teachers remember their own experiences discussing controversial topics in the classroom. I used the vignettes to gather information in response to questions of controversial issues in the classroom and more direct interview questions to gather sociocultural information regarding school and classroom climate, and parent and community perceptions.

A teacher’s willingness to have discussions of a controversial nature is only one way teachers can connect with their students to contribute to social and cognitive development in adolescence (Davis, 2003; Resnick et al., 1997). More research is needed to connect the sociocultural perspective and the positive student-teacher relationship developed through or because of controversial discussions in the classroom.

Research Question One: How do teachers react and respond to controversial questions in the classroom?

The answer to Research Question One is first dependent upon the teacher’s status as either a Willing or Reluctant teacher. Willing teachers were more likely to understand the value of teachable moments, moments when an exceptionally high-interest situation or conversation occurs that lends itself to additional discussions of a particular topic, which usually involve a sense of personal responsibility (Havighurst, 1952). These teachers were willing and capable of connecting this teachable moment of interest with educationally relevant material. Noddings (2006) found that students remember the connections made between teachable moments and educationally relevant material more often than facts. When teachers know their content and have the skills to reach all
students, which is necessary to utilize teachable moments effectively, learning is more widespread (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

Reluctant teachers employed various avoidance techniques. Reluctant teachers were more apt to use humor to avoid a certain topic of discussion. Reluctant teachers, more often than Willing teachers, also referred students to other teachers, counselors, or students’ parents instead of encouraging a discussion of a controversial nature. The use of avoidance techniques such as these or attempts to silence students is typically employed by teachers who are not willing or able to discuss a particular subject. This avoidance is consistent with Noddings’ (2006) research of teachers’ preparedness to teach critical lessons or subjects outside the bounds of the published standards.

**Research Question Two: Why do teachers respond to controversial questions the way that they do?**

Even though my study resulted in only 13 Willing teachers, 11 of them were female, which is consistent with Noddings’ (2002) views on women and caring. Noddings claimed that women tend to put themselves into an empathetic position, revisiting their own memories when moral discussions arise. In addition, when students are able to associate real feelings with teachers they are more apt to speak freely (Noddings, 2002).

My study also revealed more Willing teachers in 4-9 grade bands and Special Education. My research included only two Special Education teachers, both female, one Willing and one Reluctant. If my study had included more Special Education teachers, I
may have found more Willing teachers. I based this on the additional amount of
unstructured time Special Education teachers have with students for one-on-one study.

Teachers licensed to teach specifically grades 4-9 made up 50% of the total
number of Willing teachers. The reason for this may be that teacher education courses for
middle-level teachers obtaining licensure for teaching grades 4-9 receive additional
training in middle school philosophy and adolescent development (Kommer, personal
communication, January 12, 2010). However, data gathered by White, Ross, Miller,
Dever, and Jones (in press) concerning middle school teachers’ practices five years after
receiving their teaching licensure found that they had received specialized instruction
regarding adolescent development in the form of advisory programs, yet rarely
incorporated this training into their own classrooms unless dictated by their school.

Research Question Three: To What Extent do Teachers Feel Empowered to
Respond to Controversial Questions?

An organized program of character education failed to empower teachers to
respond to students’ controversial questions. Although some of the schools had character
education programs that were typical of a virtues approach to teach right and wrong
(Simon, 2001), many teachers claimed that neither the students nor the teachers would
“buy into them” and did not follow the directions of the program (i.e., repeating a motto,
citing examples of good character, singing a catchy song, etc.). Many of the teachers,
both Willing and Reluctant, claimed that having a relationship with the students,
engaging them in conversations, listening to students, and modeling a person of good
character was far more likely to instill a sense of moral growth and responsibility than a character education program.

Knowledge is power. Willing teachers were empowered by their own abilities to relate controversial discussions to educationally relevant content. These discussions can help develop critical thinking skills and subject content knowledge (Hess, 2009). Willing teachers acknowledged the intrusion discussions could have in the classroom and their lack of enough teaching time. However, they felt controversial discussions helped relate subject content to real world issues for students. Previous research found that given the same content information, students who also had a classroom discussion showed more improvement than students who were not encouraged to discuss the material (Hess, 2009; Johnston, Anderman, Milne, Klenck, & Harris, 1994; Parker & Hess, 2001; Wilen, 2004).

Willing Teachers also were empowered by their beliefs that moral development is the most difficult developmental characteristic that adolescents’ experience. Sixty-nine percent of the Willing teachers stated that the moral development of adolescents was the most difficult developmental issue. In my research, I classified responses such as responsibility for actions, fairness, acceptance of diversity, empathy, tolerance, and caring as moral. Previous research confirmed that controversial questions in the classroom that focus on moral issues can help to establish a basis for student behavior, self-esteem, and student achievement (Coles, 1986; Greene, 1988; Noddings, 1992, 1994; Simon, 2001).
Research Question Four? What do teachers perceive to be the restraints on dealing with controversial questions?

One of the restraints on controversial questions in the classroom is an unwillingness to use instructional time in a discussion rather than the planned curriculum. Many times teachers have approximately 150 students throughout the school day for only 42 minutes per class. If teachers are unaware of the value of discussions in the classroom, they are more apt to disregard them (Hess, 2009; Wilen, 2004).

Reluctant teachers in my study also referred more to their own discomfort when discussions of a controversial nature ensued. The overwhelming reason Reluctant teachers were uncomfortable with controversial discussions in the classroom was because they did not want to influence the students’ opinions or contradict views of their students’ parents. In many cases, Reluctant teachers would use a variety of avoidance techniques. This is consistent with the research of Hess (2009) who found that teachers typically fall into one of four approaches to controversial discussions: denying that an issue is controversial at all, highlighting the teacher’s opinion, avoiding the discussion, or having the discussion in a balanced way, offering all sides of the issue.

Emerging Framework

Grounded theory is a process not an end product (Charmaz, 2006). Using the grounded theory approach, I was able to incorporate teachers’ responses to vignettes, teachers’ personal experiences, answers to interview protocol questions, and memoing to discover their perspectives of controversial questions in the middle school classroom. Five themes were the result:
• Willing teachers employ teachable moments.

• Willing teachers can relate discussions back to educationally-relevant material.

• Willing teachers understand that moral development is the most difficult developmental characteristic for adolescents.

• Reluctant teachers resent the time controversial questions in the classroom take from previously planned material.

• Reluctant teachers are uncomfortable engaging in controversial discussions with students.

One sub-theme resulted from the reluctant teachers:

  o Reluctant teachers question the legitimacy of student questions.

    ▪ Reluctant teachers often use humor as a way to avoid a controversial discussion.

    ▪ Reluctant teachers refer students with controversial questions to others.

Willing teachers understand adolescents’ struggles through moral development and are empathetic as adolescents come to terms with their self-identities (Beane & Lipka, 1987). Opportunities for students to share in discussions of controversial issues can be part of a positive student-teacher relationship (Davis, 2003), which can also assist in the development of community classrooms (Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1996). Willing teachers had slightly less experience than Reluctant teachers, which may or may not be related to teacher education curriculum changes. Supported by the National Middle School Association, the practice of Advisory, which included building self-awareness and a positive climate within small group activities, changed to Advocacy around 2001.
Advocacy maintains that students need a positive adult to support them in all developmental capacities regardless the venue (James & Spradling, 2001). If Willing teachers were education students during the time that advisory was changing to advocacy, teachers may have been exposed to more information regarding developmental characteristics as well. (Advisory and Advocacy programs have since merged their ideas and the term has become interchangeable.) Additional research could provide information regarding particular teacher education courses of Willing and Reluctant teachers. In addition, further investigation into parental support of school and positive student-teacher relationships could uncover how parents contribute to the school environment or how parental support encourages both teachers and students to succeed (Beane, 2005).

The Use of Vignettes

The use of vignettes as a means of data collection was beneficial to the participants in my research and to me as a researcher. Vignettes of hypothetical situations placed the participants in similar circumstances they may have experienced in the past. This encouraged participants to remember and reflect on their past behavior and promoted responses that were more truthful. Controversial topics are often uncomfortable. The use of vignettes in which the participants responded to a situation made it easier to answer rather than responding to me personally. It was not unusual for participants to claim that they would be willing to discuss any controversial topic with students, but when asked this same question through use of the vignette, many teachers changed their minds. This may have been because teachers better understood the controversial question by using the vignette, or it may have been because it helped the
participant to feel what it would be like to be in that particular situation and respond as he or she would in reality.

Vignettes were beneficial to me as a researcher as they gave me the opportunity to ask my participants questions through use of hypothetical stories. This made me, as well as my participants, more comfortable. Vignettes also gave me the opportunity to explore a variety of controversial topics. Using Noddings’ (2006) suggestions of topics that demand critical thinking and are applicable to every person gave me the opportunity to compare and contrast the participants’ responses among various topics and the opportunity to compare responses among participants. For the most part, I was pleased with the conversations that my vignettes encouraged. There were occasions that participants did not relate to a particular vignette. In this case, I should have asked my participants to reflect on similar experiences and share more of their own personal stories. In the future, I would work with a peer group continuously throughout the study, constantly refining the vignettes. I also should have used more direct questioning as to why they did or did not answer students’ questions in the past. In the future, I would like to have the participants develop and write their own vignettes, as this would make the situations more realistic and personal to them. I believe that vignettes would be useful in a large-scale quantitative study, in particular utilizing a survey design with limited or scaled responses. Information on a large-scale study could show connections between teachers and their willingness to have controversial discussions in the classroom and promote positive student-teacher relationships.
Implications for Education and Research

Most teachers would agree that classroom talk is essential for understanding academic issues, but some teachers may not understand that without classroom talk we are missing the opportunity to assist our students in their moral development and quest for identity. Barnes (2008) claimed that social relations through classroom talk are as important as content, and are fundamental to the goals of teaching. When students are comfortable enough to disagree and challenge each other’s ideas because they are in a community of learners, students learn to empathize and appreciate others. This empathy and appreciation for others is the backbone of social and moral development (Barnes, 1976; Fine et al., 1995; Greene, 1988; Nodding, 1988, 1992, 1994, 1998, 2006; Pierce & Gilles, 2008; Simon, 2001; Wolk, 1998).

Most teachers I interviewed agreed that the development of relationships is a more authentic method of teaching character education than pre-packaged programs that are delivered without time or attention to discussions (Greene, 1988; Nodding, 1988, 1992, 1994, 1998, 2006; Simon, 2001). My research suggests there may be some things that prevent the development of those relationships. Specifically, students would benefit from teachers who had less pressure to cover mandated curriculum and were offered professional development about the value of discussions to promote positive moral development. With this training, teachers’ ideas of what constitutes appropriateness for middle school students may be expanded and they might become more willing to have controversial discussions in the classroom. This research could benefit teachers, administrators, pre-teachers, teacher preparation professors, and ultimately, middle school students.
Emerging Grounded Theory and Further Research

After the division of Willing and Reluctant teachers, the most prevalent emergent theory of controversial questions in the classroom relied on Willing teachers’ understandings of the importance of moral development of adolescents and the Reluctant teachers’ narrow zones of personal comfort. These concepts are connected within a broad view of teacher education. As pre-service teachers become more fluid in their knowledge of adolescent developmental characteristics, their comfort levels could broaden. Teachers who are unfamiliar with all of the developmental characteristics of adolescents may view student questions as “too adult” and not be comfortable discussing these issues. As more and more teachers understand adolescent development, their own zones of comfort could widen to include controversial issues that are important to adolescents. The result would be more positive student-teacher relationships.

More research is needed in the area of controversial questions in the middle school classroom. One area I neglected to research was the influence of a positive or negative school climate on a teacher’s willingness or reluctance to discuss controversial issues in the classroom. While my data hints at aspects of school climate and culture, I did not research this angle that should be explored. Many teachers, once they are employed, will become as their co-teachers and follow the culture of the school, ignoring their pre-service training. Additional research could also investigate the parameters that surround Reluctant teachers’ narrow zones of comfort and efforts to expand this comfort to connect the moral development of adolescents to controversial discussions in the classroom. What would be necessary for Reluctant teachers to become Willing teachers?
- additional training regarding adolescent development to understand where our students are physically, cognitively, psychologically, socially and morally
- a deeper understanding of how moral development affects adolescents
- a willingness and professional autonomy to employ teachable moments
- the ability to connect controversial questions to educationally relevant material requires teachers to be experts in their content area
- more time with students or less state mandated curriculum requirements
- a desire to connect with students to develop relationships
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APPENDIX A

HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD
A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Karen Hennessy, a doctoral student in Ashland University’s Department of Leadership Studies is conducting a dissertation research study to help understand how and why teachers respond to student-generated controversial questions in the classroom. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a middle school teacher.

B. PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in the study, the following will occur:

1. You will be interviewed either in a focus group with other teachers or individually.
2. The audio and video of your interview will be recorded.
3. The interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes.

C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

1. If any of the interview or focus group discussion questions make you uncomfortable or upset you are free to decline to answer any questions you do not wish to answer or to leave the group at any time.
2. Confidentiality: Participation in research will involve a loss of privacy; however, your records will be handled as confidentially as possible. The researchers will ask you and the other people in the focus group to use only first names during the group session. They will also ask group members not to tell anyone outside the group what any particular person said in the group. However, the researchers cannot guarantee that everyone will keep the discussion private. Only Karen Hennessy will have access to your study records and audiotapes. After the group discussion has been transcribed from the tapes, the tapes will be destroyed. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications that may result from this study.

D. BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study.

E. COSTS

There will be no costs to you as a result of taking part in this study.

F. PAYMENT

There will be no payment as a result of taking part in this study.
G. QUESTIONS

You have talked to Karen Hennessy about this study and have had your questions answered. If you have further questions, you may call her at 740-360-5505.

If you have any comments or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with Karen Hennessy. If for some reason you do not wish to do this, you may contact the Human Subjects Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the board office between 8:00 and 5:00, Monday through Friday, by calling Randy Gearhart, Chair, HSRB, at 419-207-6198.

H. CONSENT

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. Your decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on your present or future status as a teacher.

If you agree to participate, you should sign below.

_________________________  ______________________________
Date                              Signature of Study Participant

_________________________  ______________________________
Date                              Signature of Person Obtaining Consent
TO:                 Karen Hennessy
FROM:              Randy Gearhart, Chair
DATE:              October 5, 2010
RE:                Human Subjects Review Board Approval

The Human Subjects Review Board has approved the research proposal you submitted. You may proceed with the project.

The primary function of the HSRB is to ensure protection of human research subjects. As a result of this mandate, we ask that you pay close attention to the fundamental ethical principles of autonomy, justice, and beneficence when establishing your research proposal. These ethical principles pertain specifically to the issues of informed consent, fair selection of subjects, and risk/benefit considerations.

If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Randy Gearhart
Phone:  419-207-6198
Fax:    419-289-5460
E-mail: rgearhar@ashland.edu
APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP VIGNETTES
The categories are taken from Noddings’ 2006 study *Critical Lessons*, in which she suggested topics for class conversations.

RELIGION: It is just after lunch during the last 20 minutes of your last class. In the back of the room Mary and Jim, genuinely “good kids,” kind, polite, and well-spoken are in a serious conversation. “What’s going on?” you ask. Mary turns abruptly toward you and says, “Jim says that the Bible says the world will end in 2012.” Mary’s voice cracks and you can see that her eyes are filling with tears. “I’ve never read the Bible. Have you? Does it say this?” At this point, most of the students in the class begin talking over one another, half of the students in agreement while the other half disagrees.

- How would you respond to Mary’s question?
- How do you respond to the other students who are disagreeing with one another?
- Is there any type of question about religion that you remember a student asking that you would not answer?

PARENTING: Two of your male students were recently in a fight in the hallway then sent to the office. Roberta and Jennie were near them when the fight broke out, so you ask them why the boys were fighting. Roberta says, “They live next door to each other and their mothers have been fighting. Steve’s mom called the police on Ed’s mom last night because she got real drunk and started hitting Ed’s little sisters. Do you think it’s okay for parents to hit their kids?”

- Do you explain the difference between spanking and hitting? (If you believe there is one.)
- Do you refer this conversation to the guidance counselor?
Is there a difference between fighting and hitting?

WAR: The class has been studying world wars for the past week. Susan, typically one of the more shy girls, raises her hand. When you call on her, she says, “Why are we still at war in Iraq? Doesn’t President Obama realize nobody cares anymore?” John, sitting next to Susan stands from his seat and replies loudly, “Says who? My uncle has been in Iraq for over a year. He still cares. My family cares.” The rest of the students are taken aback by John’s tone of voice and await your comment.

Do you ever point out that students need not adopt adult opinions?

Do you talk about your own personal experience during the terrorist attacks of September 11?

Is it okay for students to see you cry? Does this added vulnerability make your relationship with students easier or do you fear students would use the vulnerability against you?

MAKING A LIVING: A group of boys were sitting together in class when one of the more outspoken boys, Adam, says, “Why do we even have to come to school, it’s so lame.” Before you have a chance to answer, Kyle, a boy in a nearby group, adds, “Ya, I want a job that requires the least amount of work with the most amount of money. I’m just going to be a rapper anyway, make lots of money and live in a big house in L.A., so school is a big waste of my time.” Sara speaks up from the back of the room, “I’m just gonna get a dumb-check every month like everyone else at home.”

“What is a dumb-check?” you ask.
“You know, when you go to the doctor and pretend to be dumb and they sign a paper so they send you a check every month.” “Why don’t you stay home and get a check instead of coming here every day?”

- Would you ever tell a student that he or she could not (or should not) be something when he or she grows up?

LEARNING AND SELF-UNDERSTANDING: Jasper is standing at the pencil sharpener talking to one of his many friends named Brendan when the conversation gets more jovial. “It’s true,” Jason says with a smile, “I swear. You can even ask the teacher.” Brendan looks at you. “Jason says he gets As on all of his math homework because he’s in the slow class and they only have to do five problems each night and my class has to do 15. He also says they get to use multiplication charts during class and always on tests and we never do. Do you think that’s fair?”

- Do you explain the difference between fairness and equity?

- Is it okay to point out that different students have different needs?

HOUSE AND HOME: Jeanie approaches your desk, visibly upset. “I can’t do my language arts homework,” she says in between sobs. “We are supposed to describe our bedroom in a story. My parents just got divorced so me and my mom and my two sisters just moved in with my aunt and I don’t even have a bed anymore. I have to sleep on the couch in the living room.” Jeanie reaches for a Kleenex from your desk and wipes her eyes. “What am I going to do? I don’t want to fail the assignment but I don’t want everyone knowing my business either.”

- Do you focus more on helping Jeanie modify the assignment or do you respond affectively, concerned more with her home situation?
OTHER PEOPLE: Teddy and Marco, friends since kindergarten, rush into the classroom, sweaty and breathless, just as the bell rings. “I’m never going to make it to my classes on time this year,” Ted says.

“Ya,” Marco agrees. “When we were in sixth grade, we could come down the front hallway after gym, but eighth graders aren’t allowed in the front hallway, so we have to go all the way around to stay in the eighth grade hall.”

Annie, while opening her notebook, adds to the conversation, “My best friend is in sixth grade and I can’t see her all day. I’m not even allowed to sit with her on the bus.” “We haven’t even done anything wrong,” says Marco, “but we’re being punished. Why does the school treat us like criminals?”

- How do we teach students about trust, which is necessary in all relationships?

ANIMALS AND NATURE: Last week the students finished constructing their miniature ecosystems. This week many of them already have baby guppies, tadpoles, or small snail offspring. As your first class arrives and begins taking observations the class gets louder as one of the girls lets out a scream. “They’re dead,” Rachael wails, “all of them!” Upon closer observation you discover that someone has poured orange juice from their breakfast into the aquariums, killing most of the offspring and some of the adults. “Why would someone do this?” Rachael asks.

- Is this more about classroom climate than animals?
- Do you believe that respect of animals and nature should be taught (encouraged) in school?
- Do you think having classroom pets is a realistic way to teach respect of animals?
ADVERTISING AND PROPAGANDA: Julie and Margie, good friends since elementary school come to you after class. “Tell her she’s not fat,” Margie says. “But I am,” Julie says, as she stands at her desk. “Look at this,” she says as she pinches the skin at her middle. “I’m never gonna look like her,” she says as she points to the cover of Cosmo Girl magazine. “Don’t you think I need to go on a diet?”

- Health priority vs. attractiveness priority
- Do students understand the effect advertisers have on what they wear, eat, drink, and how they spend their money?
- Do students understand how the media influences their tastes in music, movies, and television?

GENDER: A small group of students doing research online comes across a picture of a gay pride parade. A conversation ensues regarding the man in the picture dressed as a woman and a woman dressed as a man. The conversation begins to get louder when Jessica, an academically accelerated 12-year-old, suddenly yells at Susan, “No one is gay until they are adults, that’s why you never see boys dressing as girls or girls dressing like boys.” Susan looks at you and asks, “Is it true that kids aren’t gay?”

- Do you point out that heterosexual students know they are heterosexual?
APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Interview questions are based on the recommendations of Weiss (1994), *Learning from Strangers*.

1. How long have you taught middle school?
2. What is your licensure/certification?
3. How would one of your students describe your classroom?
4. How would one of your students describe you as his or her teacher?
5. How would a parent describe your school?
6. What type(s) of character education have you previously been involved in?
7. What do you believe is the most difficult developmental characteristic middle school students must endure?
8. Vignette for one-on-one interview: While talking with the students at the end of the class period, Susan, a small, bright girl, announces that, Mr. Stanley, a teacher on your team, is not nice to the students. Many of the other students agree. You have taught with Mr. Stanley for the last five years. You have heard these complaints before. Susan continues, “He teases all the time,” she says, “and then he gets personal.” “But don’t even think about teasing him back.” Jeff, one of the more talkative boys, adds in, “He told Joel he should shave his head if he didn’t want to comb his hair.” “But when Joel said, ‘at least I have hair’ Mr. Stanley sent him to the hallway.” What do you say to these students?
9. Under what circumstances would you feel so uncomfortable that you would not answer a student’s question?
10. How would you describe your relationship with the majority of your students?