

MORAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THOUGHTFUL INQUIRY,
DISCUSSION, AND REFLECTION ON VIRTUE

by Lynda George*

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents, in general, have been viewed as lacking in virtue and in need of moral lessons. Urban adolescents, in particular, have been perceived by the media to be devoid of virtue (Daly, 1996). As a result of media coverage on violent crimes, gangs, drug use, school drop-out rates, and discipline problems, these same adolescents have been blamed for urban problems and viewed as deficient or in need of moral development. In response, ethical training courses, projects, and programs for the teaching of character have been developed and promoted (Leming 1996; Mariano 1996; Putman 1995; Hoff-Summer 1993). Public schools have become the place where character education programs are utilized as a means by which the teaching of moral development and ethics are addressed as expressed in the Character Education Resource Guide (1997, December). Giving urban middle school students a voice in the continuing dialogue on virtue and virtuous actions is both important and appropriate as an approach to the study of their moral development. This qualitative exploratory action-research case study provided urban middle school students the opportunity to read and discuss a philosophical perspective of virtue in order to seek out, acknowledge, and question their perceptions of virtue and virtuous acts, and to see how virtue is reflected in their school's cultural milieu, as well as their perceptions of society's virtuous actions according to an Aristotelian perspective.

PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS

The insights of contemporary philosophers Mortimer Adler (1988) and Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) helped shape the design of this study. According to Adler and MacIntyre, to study virtue one should look to the thoughts and discussions of ancient philosophers, specifically to the dialogues of Plato and the text of Aristotle's *Ethics* as the means for understanding. (Adler, 1988; MacIntyre, 1984). This study utilized the works of Plato and Aristotle as the means to discuss and discover urban middle school students' perceptions of virtue in relation to moral development. The influence of psychology as the

*Assistant Professor, Central Connecticut State University

means to analyze and discuss moral development can not be overlooked in a study on adolescent views of virtue. There are also several important links between two modern psychologists and the ancient philosophers Plato and Aristotle.

Psychologists Kohlberg (1984), and Gilligan (1993) brought forth an articulation of moral development rooted in an ethics of justice and caring respectively. Based on responses to a series of moral dilemmas concerned with justice, Kohlberg evaluated and assigned a level of moral development (level one being the lowest and six the highest) to the subjects of his studies. Kohlberg addressed three problems of justice to evaluate his subject's responses to moral dilemmas. He uses Aristotle's (trans. 1953/1976) work on justice as a rationale for this stating that "... in a sense justice is the primary and general moral virtue for Aristotle, insofar as moral virtue governs relations between a person and other persons within a society. Justice is the only 'other regarding' virtue enumerated by Aristotle" (Kohlberg, 1984, p.226). Gilligan's studies, based on open-ended interviews with women, revealed an ethic of care which she purports to be as evolved as an ethic of justice.

Gilligan moved the conversation from relativism to relationship and brought another voice to the conversation of moral development - that of women (Gilligan, 1993) Gilligan's research reported a commonality among women regarding moral development. When interviewed about the meaning of morality, the reason for being moral and what is morally right or wrong women gave answers that were quite similar. Within a small study, all responders expressed a ...wish not to hurt others and the hope that in morality lies a way of solving conflicts so that no one will be hurt. The moral person is one who helps others; goodness is service, meeting one's obligations and responsibilities to others, if possible without sacrificing oneself (pp.65-66). These concepts are similar to the Aristotelian view of friendship. Friendship was a bond that kept the community together (Aristotle trans. 1953/1976). "Between friends there is no need for justice, but people who are just still need the quality of friendship; and indeed friendliness is considered to be justice in the fullest sense (p.259).

Since Kohlberg's initial work was with middle-class males (1984) the voices of women, the poor and the disenfranchised were not taken into consideration as he developed his moral stages. Psychologist Robert Coles (1986) showed the significance of another voice through the retelling of the story of Ruby Bridges, a courageous young child caught in the middle of the civil rights movement, who at age six took part in the desegregation of schools in New Orleans. Based on Ruby's responses to the people who wanted and spat at her on her way to school Coles saw a correlation of her moral development with the highest level of moral development in Kohlberg's model. According to Kohlberg's research the young Ruby would not have been capable of this at her age.

The complexity undergirding this study of virtue was initiated and enacted in dialogue. Plato recognized this centuries ago when he constructed major works utilizing Socrates as a teacher who asked questions. This style of

teaching and learning, referred to as the Socratic Method, is inductive and dialectical. It conforms to the natural order of discovery which teaching imitates as a cooperative art (Adler, 1988). This method is relevant and meaningful for teaching and learning all disciplines within the arts and sciences. It is especially important for any study designed to determine what is best for the individual and what is best for the community since the study of human acts, actions, and interactions is not an exact science. The knowledge of virtue, Socrates suggested in the *Meno* (Plato trans. 1956/1982), is different from the knowledge of science. In order to discover, know, and understand, Socrates said one must look to opinion because "...it is not only under the guidance of knowledge that human action is well and rightly conducted....True opinion is as good a guide as knowledge for the purpose of acting rightly" (pp.152-153).

Aristotle defined ten moral virtues, connected each to a sphere of action or feeling, and placed each virtue within the middle, or mean, of its deficiency and excess commonly referred to as the "Doctrine of the Mean" (Aristotle trans. 1953/1976 p.100). Moral virtue is...concerned with feelings and actions, and these involve excess, deficiency, and a mean...It is in the field of actions and feelings that virtue operates; and in them excel and deficiency are failings, whereas the mean is praised...Virtue, then is a mean condition... (p.101). He further stated that being good is difficult because it is hard to find the mean or midpoint in many given cases...It is easy to get angry - anyone can do that - or to give and spend money; but to feel or act towards the right person to the right extent at the right time for the right reason in the right way - that is not easy..." (pp.108-109). Aristotle's table of virtues and vices, along with their definitions was used to initiate the first of four focus-group seminar discussions to ascertain students' perceptions of virtue.

Within their works on virtue and right actions, both Socrates and Aristotle considered "the good and the apparent good" (Aristotle trans. 1953/1976; Plato trans. 1956/1982). In making the right choice, a good decision may be clouded by what appears to be good but is not. A second focus-group seminar discussion to initiate thoughtful inquiry about the good and the apparent good was held to further identify students' perceptions of virtuous actions.

The third focus-group focused on the relationship between virtue and living a happy life. Happiness, according to Aristotle (trans. 1953/1976), is not a state but an activity in accordance with goodness. Activities are chosen either for themselves or for the sake of something else. Actions that are chosen in accordance with goodness are for the sake of themselves because they are doing fine and good actions. Happiness is not the same as amusement. Amusement is a form of relaxation and not an end. A happy life appears to be lived in accordance with goodness, contemplation, and leisure. "It is not enough to know about goodness; we must endeavor to possess and use it, or adopt any other means to become good ourselves" (p.335).

To examine urban middle school students' perceptions of society's acts and actions, the fourth focus group was on justice as it relates to virtue. A portion of the dialogue on justice between Socrates and Glaucon in The Republic (Plato trans. 1968/1991) was read and discussed. Participatory action-research was the natural means for discovery within this study.

By design, participatory action-research is for the "...enlightenment and awakening of...peoples - especially those forgotten, despised or left voiceless by the dominant establishments" (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991, p.viii). Urban middle school students have not been given the opportunity to think about, discuss, discover, or determine their moral beliefs in a academic setting. While these students have been left out of the discussion on virtue, as well as the construction of curriculum design which would empower them to act virtuously, they have also been perceived as lacking in virtue by the larger community. Through the use of "...participatory action research, the knowledge and experience of people - often oppressed groups - is directly honored and valued" (Reason, 1994, p.328). By bringing ancient philosophers to the experiences of urban middle school students, this study provides the opportunity to honor, value, teach, and learn from participating students through an action-research design that encouraged the expression of students' opinions.

Ten "at-risk" students attending a large urban middle school in Connecticut participated in this study. Data was gathered through three sources. Initial and exit interviews were held. The interview questions were generated from the research questions. The second part of the research design used participatory-action research strategies. The focus group, comprised of the same ten students, met with the researcher four times to discuss virtue utilizing the Socratic Method. Fontana and Frey (1994) argue that the focus group discussion design, also referred to as a group interview, is "...data rich, flexible, stimulating to respondents, recall aiding, and cumulative and elaborative over and above individual responses"(p.365). The readings aided this focus group discussion design by providing an academically rich introduction for each meeting. The readings also provided a common point of reference and vocabulary. Reflective journals were kept by student participants and comprised the third part of the research design. Students were asked to keep a "critical incident" journal at the end of each focus group meeting. Journals were maintained following each of the four focus group meetings. Data was gathered and analyzed using the pre- and post-interviews, focus group discussions, and reflective journals. What follows are their voices as they reasoned and discussed their perceptions of virtue in relation to the thoughts and ideas of Plato and Aristotle.

THE MORAL VIRTUE TRUTH

Urban Middle School students perceive virtue as truth in conflict with protecting the feelings of others. Urban middle school students perceive virtue as truth in conflict with protecting self-interest.

Research Question 1: What are urban middle school students' perceptions of virtue according to an Aristotelian perspective?

Five of nine students discussed the virtue truth during the first focus group meeting. Truthfulness was perceived as good but not without some exceptions. The students said that protecting the feelings of others, particularly those the students cared about, was more virtuous than telling the truth. Students further stated that protecting their own self-interest was more important than telling the truth, particularly to those they saw as outsiders such as the police and teachers. Ruby prefaced the first scenario by stating the importance of telling the truth.

I compare honesty and the truth, and honesty is the best key. But when it comes to telling somebody they are ugly or complaining or hurting their feelings, I think the truth can hurt. So you should say the truth only when you know it won't hurt that person. Tamika countered that the truth, though it hurts, was necessary.

Sometimes the people do need to be hurt 'cause, say she had a husband and he was cheating on her and you knew but you knew it was gonna hurt, but you have to tell her, 'cause you wouldn't want her to sit there and get played. Ruby presented the group with a scenario and asked them what they would do. Let's say, in the street you are a bad person, I'm not saying a bad person, but you know how it's different when you are in school you behave in a different way then when you are in the streets? And let's say you smoke, that's an example, and you come to school and the teachers are asking you do you smoke or da, da, da, da, da, da. I think you should not tell the truth; I think that's...Jesus completed her thought "It's none of your business." Tamika who argued for truth earlier presented still another scenario arguing the opposite view to protect self interest.

When you're skipping [school] and...you are walking down the block and you probably see a cop or something and they ask you why you aren't in school and you say 'cause I'm about to go to a doctor's appointment. I don't think you should tell the cop the truth cause you'll be in a lot of trouble. Jesus changed his position for this scenario saying, "I'd tell the truth."

Within yet another scenario described by Tamika, self-interest and a rationale that she perceived taking another person's feelings into consideration was presented. "When you are skipping and you go back to your house and your aunt came home early and you get caught and you tell her you got out of school early...You would lie to prevent from getting into problems and making her not trust you..."

JOURNAL ENTRIES

The moral virtue truth was further defined and described in student journal entries. Carolyn, for instance, justified not telling the truth from a self-interest perspective. “We discussed about when it is right and good to tell the truth or lie. It is just when people tell lies sometimes so they themselves won’t get in trouble. But I think on certain occasions you should tell the truth so it won’t get worse.”

Victoria gave examples of when to and when not to tell the truth in her reflective journal entry:

I believe that you shouldn’t always say the truth because imagine your mother asks you if she looks nice and she had an accident. You would maybe say yes because you don’t want her to feel bad. If your friend

is doing something wrong and your mother asks you what are they doing, well you will say the truth because you don’t want them to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Tamika simply wrote, “On truthfulness we agreed that being truthful was good sometimes but at other times to lie to prevent problems.”

THE MORAL VIRTUE PATIENCE AS IT RELATES TO ANGER

Urban Middle School students perceive virtue as patience in relationship to self-control and the controlling of anger. The students were especially moved to examine the virtue of patience and its relationship to anger. These students, all of whom have been determined by authority to have some degree of anger management issues, found Aristotle’s views to be arresting. Ruby began this section of the discussion by saying, “...when he talked about you should take out your temper, or whatever, in a certain time, in a certain place.” Maya interrupted her and said, “Yup, that is the part that I agree with. Sometimes, like when I hold my anger in, I just let it all out at once. It makes me feel better letting it out at the same time.” All of the students agreed with Aristotle on the importance of releasing one’s anger. The means for determining the appropriate time and place to show anger was of particular interest and indeed most challenging to these middle school students. “How do we know if it is the right time or the right place?” Ruby asked, and Tamika concurred, “Yeah, that is the problem - when and where?” Will’s response was, “...I just empty mine on the spot.” Jesus articulated the complexity saying, “the right time is not always the right place but I think you should just empty out where ever you please, man.” Students perceived the withholding of emotion as dangerous within and beyond the urban context.

Tamika explained: That’s why them people be blowing up schools yo. Because they [are] holding it all inside. Like, say someone was being picked on his whole life in school and one day somebody just does something to make

him click. He goes home, gets a gun and comes and shoots everybody up. Jesus retorted, "Yeah, that is why you should empty out on the spot. Like yell back...I'm saying, I just be yelling..." The group was queried if they had expressed their anger at the wrong time. Will responded, "Yeah, especially when [they thought I] threatened to kill the teacher because I told her 'sometimes you make me so mad I feel like killing you.'"

Ruby asked again, "Ok, how do you know when is the right time and when is not the right time?" Five students responded. Maya suggested feelings hold a key to a resolve. Sometimes you don't know when is the right time, only you can know that by the way you feel. Well, I don't know, that's just with me. I guess nobody knows what is the right time...The right time can't always be the right answer because sometimes the right time is right in front of everybody and that could...make everybody else feel bad. So you got to think of the best time to do it. Ruby integrated the concept of relationship and friendship as a key to anger management. All right, I think, besides the fact of letting yourself go I think [there is] another way. Instead of keeping it inside and instead of hurting somebody else, if you have that specific bond with somebody, and you can talk to that person, and they know, all right she is bugging right now, she might be screaming at me right now, but she is mad and I understand her and she could let it all go with me. I think that is better knowing that you could talk to somebody and know that you could just cry in front of them, know you could just laugh in front of them and that is better. Let your feelings out; let your feelings out in front of somebody. Tamika, building on Ruby's thoughts brought the dialogue to an Aristotelian perception of the virtue of patience regarding anger:

Not all the time are you going to be with that person that you can just let it out with. Sometimes you are going to be with the person you can't do that, like say, probably a teacher, or a principal, or a cop, or something...then you are going to have to try your best to hold it in. That's like self-control right there. Rosa stated other possible release mechanisms whereby promoting virtue when she said: It doesn't always have to be [that] you talk to somebody. Sometimes when you are angry you could go to your room, like cool down, listen to music, or write about it...It's not all violence. When I am angry, I write. I let out all my feelings. That is better...because...I can't always go yell at somebody. When my mother yells at me or something, if I do something wrong I go to my room, turn on my radio and start writing. I feel relief after I do that. It is not all violence. Jesus concurred, "It's true, what Rosa was saying. It's better to write something down. Like you said (referring to Ruby) you could just talk to your friends..."

JOURNAL ENTRY

Ruby wrote on anger and patience: Another thing I think is not virtuous about anger is just taking it out on someone. You should know your problems and

think of some solutions to break through them. If it does not help, take it out on a person or in a place you know you won't regret afterwards.

Research Question 2: What are urban middle school students' perceptions of virtuous acts according to an Aristotelian perspective?

Making Virtuous Decisions and Choices Urban Middle School students perceive virtuous acts, according to an Aristotelian perspective, as related to choices and/or decision making. The discussion continued and Ruby quickly interjected, "But there is a difference. There is a difference from fun and good because if you smoke weed, you could feel good but it is not a good thing." Choice, an important element in Aristotle's work on determining virtuous acts, became the topic of discussion.

Jesus commented, "I think everything is a choice." Ruby agreed and added, "I think everything in life is a choice." Maya noted, "It was a choice to come here" to participate in this research. Jesus expanded on the thought by saying "It was a choice to come here...or go home...I came here to help you or I could just go home and talk on the phone and help myself." Tamika elaborated saying choice was, "everything, your choice of what to wear today, a choice to go to school, a choice who you chill..." which led Maya to bring the discussion back to virtue by interjecting "a choice to be good or bad." This led to a defining moment for Ruby, who gleefully shared her thought with the group.

I think that's how we find out if something is virtuous. The way you feel about the consequence or the way you feel about what is going to happen...You don't have to have it happen after, it could happen before. Like we're doing right now, we are thinking about should we do it or should we not do it and we think about how we will feel if our mother is hurt and that's how we know if it is right. If we feel bad about it, then it is a bad thing. If we feel good about it then it's a virtuous thing.

JOURNAL ENTRIES

In his journal entry, Jesus wrote briefly on making decisions. "The decision you make is not always the best but if you think it was good, then it probably was. But not all the things you thought were good or fun was the right thing to do."

Ruby reflected on the relationship of feelings and consequences in relationship to choice. She also took into consideration several variables which complicate making right decisions that lead to virtuous actions:

My decision on choice is everyone feels themselves if it's right or wrong. If you believe afterward you'll feel happy for your actions than you are O.K. There is such a thing as good choices, but you don't know if every choice is right, because you can do a bad thing and feel happy about it, but it doesn't make it a good choice. I believe you do

something right if in your mind you believe it's right. Always think of your consequences. I believe children enjoy taking risks and do wrong for the fun [of it]. I know I don't go around always doing right and always doing wrong but sometimes right is tedious. When you are young you live your days like [they are] your last. But as you grow you plan for tomorrow.

Maya reflected on the complexity of making virtuous decisions that lead to virtuous acts and concluded with a question. I think life is all about making decisions, good or bad, God or devil, heaven or hell, right or wrong, etcetera. I think life is a very complicated thing. You can say well, I know I did something good because probably to the other person what you did was wrong. Is there really a way for people to know if they did something good or nice for the other person?"

VIRTUOUS ACTS IN CONFLICT WITH TEEN EXPLORATION

Urban Middle School students perceive virtuous acts as being in conflict with fun, excitement, and curiosity. Jesus added another twist in making virtuous decisions when he recounted a conversation with his mother. I have some friends that my mother doesn't like. She be like, "You got a choice you can be with them even though they [will] do something bad...All you need is to stay by yourself and just be home so you won't be with a bad person." But sometimes I do because the bad person [will] be the fun person. This predicament of wrong choices being the more fun was taken even further by Maya. That's the thing with kids. They always think about what is the most fun thing. It depends on how much you gonna get in trouble for it. If you are getting in trouble a little bit they don't go for the fun thing with the quickness. If it's like you're gonna really, really get in trouble you don't hesitate; you don't hesitate as this was more fun. The researcher asked how come the "fun things" are the things you aren't supposed to do?

Oliver answered "It's not all the fun things you aren't supposed to do...the bad things are more fun than everything else." Ruby modified this extreme position by saying "I think we [are] just all curious and we just all want to experience..." to which Jesus interrupted and interjected, "Yeah, we want to do everything...It's about this age. You would rather have fun and get in trouble than not get in trouble with no fun...I like to get in trouble, that makes it exciting." Ruby agreed with Jesus and Maya added, "And kids like that. They don't care if they get in trouble. They like it, they like to argue and stuff like that."

Tamika described a time she snuck out of her house to go to a club. Once there, she felt bad, guilty, and worried. Jesus pointed out, "You will have a guilty conscience. You will not have fun." Ruby asked, "Before you snuck out, you didn't think about the consequences?" Tamika answered, "Before I snuck out it was like adrenaline in my head. All I wanted to do was go." This

response turned into a rhythmic chant showing mutual understanding among four of the six focus group participants. Ruby, “Go. You just want to go, and that’s what happens.” Maya, “It is the heightenedness.” Tamika, “The exciting. You don’t think about what is going to happen...its like the adrenaline, the excitement. It’s like kill, just go.” Jesus, “It’s like telling you to ‘do it.’ You know it’s wrong.” Ruby, “You know it’s just dumb.” Jesus, “You know it’s wrong. You can back off and walk away from the fight, but...” Tamika, “When that adrenaline is in your head.” Jesus, “When it gets in your head, you want to do it.” Tamika, “Yeah.” Jesus, “So much.” Tamika, “It makes it not a decision...It’s a yes.” Ruby, “It’s a promise.” Tamika, “It’s go. Its like yea.” Ruby, “It’s a promise.” Tamika, “It’s no doubt.” Maya, “It’s a go.” Tamika, “It’s a million dollars. Seeing it right there. Nobody is there, its definitely the right thing,. Just go”

JOURNAL ENTRY

Rosa further elaborated on these thoughts when she titled her journal entry “Bad Things” and wrote, “I believe that being bad gives you/me a rush. It makes you feel like you’re taking on something extreme. A challenge or something like that.”

Research Question 3: What are urban middle school students’ perceptions of how virtue, according to an Aristotelian perspective, is reflected in the cultural milieu of their school?

Urban Middle School students perceive virtue, according to an Aristotelian perspective, reflected in the cultural milieu of the school as related to happiness and saw happiness as marginal if not absent in school.

Five of the eight students attending the focus group deliberated over Aristotle’s thoughts on happiness as he related it to virtue. Jesus was quick to say, “There ain’t no happiness here.” To which Tamika quipped, “That is what I was about to say.” Three others nodded in agreement. Rosa spurred the discussion onward when she spoke offering the lone voice of dissent. “There is happiness because when you do something good in the school, like [when] you get an award or if you get a good grade on your test you are happy. Right or wrong?” The discussion soon turned back to Aristotle’s interpretation of happiness. Maya suggested Aristotle is: ...trying to say that happiness is not about having fun and stuff. Amusement is like when you be relaxed, and you are calm, and stuff and that you could have happiness. But when it comes down to life itself, you are going to have to have seriousness. Tamika offered: Maybe [Aristotle] trying to say happiness comes from everything...Happiness comes from within yourself. It doesn’t necessarily have to be the way, like, somebody does something, or you’re with somebody who tells you something,; you could be happy with yourself. Maya wondered philosophically, “...does happiness always have to be something good?” Rosa concurred: “That’s what

I'm thinking." Jesus offered that, "Happiness is something good. If...you broke up with your boyfriend or girlfriend, I'm saying I'd be happy because I'm released..."

The students took the thoughts they just offered on happiness and related them to grading. Tamika gave an example. It's like if you got a C plus and you know you weren't going to do good on that test. But you say, oh I got me a C plus whatever. That's good. The teacher looks at you like that's still not good; it's not good to them. Jesus reiterated his belief about school and happiness, "I don't think school is happy at all."

JOURNAL ENTRY

During his reflective writing Jesus wrote on goodness and happiness. "I think goodness makes every one happy inside like getting an A plus on your test or a teacher telling you did good. But when no one tells you how good you did then you don't feel so good."

Tamika wrote of the need for relationships to bring forth happiness within school. "I think you need friendship to survive in school."

Rosa wrote that happiness in school was accomplished through achieving goals, but unfortunately added two potential roadblocks. Achieving your goal in your work; like you pass and you get a good grade. But sometimes people get in your way; like maybe your friends could disrupt you. If you are hanging with the wrong people, they could mess you up. Or sometimes it could be the teachers cause they could stress you out, because teachers do stress you out. They think your life is easy but they don't know where we live and what we go through. We go through way more things than they did when they were younger so they don't know how we live.

VIRTUE IN RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOL AND THE COMMUNITY

Urban middle school students perceive virtue, according to an Aristotelian perspective, reflected in the cultural milieu of the school as hampered by teacher perceptions of their community.

The discussion on happiness within the school led to a discussion of urban middle school students' lives within the community revealing a disconnectedness between school and community. Five of the eight student participants attending the third focus group described the differences and the impact these differences have on students. Rosa began: Well, where I live, there is a lot of drugs and a lot of violence. I hear gun shots almost everyday and I bet when they were younger they didn't go through the things that we are going through right now. Like my mother is scared for me to go outside because older guys try to talk to me and I look older than I am right now. But I'm still young and my mother don't like me to go outside a lot. When I go

somewhere, I have to go with my cousin or my brother. If I don't go out with them I can't go out at all.

Jesus agreed and elaborated still more. It's true what Rosa was talking about how teachers, I'm not saying you, you know, but teachers in general, all think it's easy for us. Probably you all smoked some of this or did some of that, but it's not like, you all didn't grow up like we did. It is hard, [is] what she is saying, if you all come through where we live and you all hear a gunshot, you get scared. But if we hear gunshots it's like somebody flushed a toilet. I see people sell drugs every day. It's like a job to them, street pharmacists.

Jesus further suggested that the requirements and expectations put on the students place them at-risk. "I think that pushes kids to drop out of school at an early age." Will continued his point, "And I think that could prepare you for life. I think by doing all that stuff [pressures and expectations] as a kid, that could prepare you for life as an adult." Maya agreed with Will's view but also saw Jesus' point and argued that stress could put students at risk. "It does prepare you for when you get older; but if you do that you will get stressed out. Say you drop out of school. Then you won't get a good job and say you have kids..." Tamika completed the thought saying then "you have no future." Maya added: "Yea you have no future to, like, say you be prepared for. You end up working in a minimum wage job or you be having, like, if you went to college, you could have had a better job to support your kids. Victoria reflected on the external pressures students have. "I believe that teachers think that it is easy for us to go to school every day and what they don't know is what's happening at home. They aren't there when we need help with something..."

Research Question 4: What are urban middle school students perceptions of society's virtuous acts and actions according to an Aristotelian perspective?

Urban Middle School students perceive virtue and virtuous actions, according to an Aristotelian perspective, within society as justice derived from enacted rules.

Following the opening seminar reading, the researcher reiterated, "One side argued we end up doing the just thing not because we want to." Maya enthusiastically interjected as she interrupted, "Because we have to." Ruby offered her perceptions...I think that we need justice...because we need to have fairness and to have the right rules and [to have] everybody just do the right thing. But still I think people...whether we have rules or not they still are in justice because they abide by the rules. They go against it if they want to, if they choose to. So Socrates, he says, that we do the right thing because we want to. That is kinda true too; but if it wasn't for the rules we would do whatever we want anyway.

Jesus remarked, "...If it wasn't for the rules, if we didn't have rules...I would just walk around naked. If there weren't any rules, we were born naked, so why can't I walk around naked?" Ruby answered, "'cause Eve ate from the apple." Jesus continued the dialogue by discussing both sides of the idea within

the context of his own life experiences. Hold on, if we didn't have any rules, then we get to do whatever we want. So we get to chill and [we] don't come to school. But we have rules [and] like the other dude [Socrates] says, we do good 'cause we want to do good. I don't want to do good. I just go to school because my mother makes me. Maya pointed out that: People want good things out of life, but they don't want to go through all that work. If we had a chance to do what we want, we would. It's true, if we didn't have any rules then we would do what we want. The reason we have rules is because we need them in order to survive.

Tamika reframed the argument and carried it through to an end. But her resolve had an unhappy ending for both the individual and society which she concluded was "messed up." ...If there weren't any rules, people would be at age 14 saying, "Oh I don't feel like going to school anymore, I'm just about to go get a job." If there wasn't a rule that says you have to get an education...in order to get a job, or something, anybody could have a job and we [would] just [be] messed up... Jesus continued to explore his example. Justice is good in the community because I'm saying I want to be naked. But you don't want to see a big person next to you naked. You know what I'm saying? So justice is good because it helps people from not doing stuff that you don't want them to do. I do not want to see this guy naked next to me, as an example. Justice helps me cause I don't want to see him naked.

Maya turned Jesus' argument around and stated, "justice helps you by saying that you wouldn't want stuff to happen to you that you wouldn't want [to happen to] other people." Jesus agreed, "Exactly." Will concurred and also pointed out that justice is a means for deterring people from doing wrong actions, "...Justice keeps people in line, it stops people [from] going into houses and stealing. Without rules, then there would be nothing you could do about it." Ruby saw it as a means for doing right actions....I think justice is very right because we need justice, like I said before, we need to be set on the right path...If it wasn't for the rules we would be all messed up. And I think even with justice, I think people still do their dirt, so people do what they want to do...There still is negativity with or without justice; but justice keeps them from doing more negative things. Like they still could murder people but, instead of having them murder people and getting away with it, justice makes it so that they can't get away with wrong. Tamika reflected on rules for the good of society.

I said, when we were talking about rules and responsibility in our community, that if it weren't for rules then everybody would do what they wanted to do. If I didn't have to go to school and I could get a job then I would. But rules are required for a healthy environment.

THE ABSENCE OF VIRTUE WITHIN THE JUDICIAL SYSTEM

Urban Middle School students perceive virtue and virtuous actions, according to an Aristotelian perspective, within society as justice hindered by timing and

racism. The discussion turned from the hypothetical to student experiences and observations. Jesus responded with an example of injustice. "But some justice is not good. Like OJ...you all know the thing, OJ and the murder thing. But I'm saying a lot of people get away with murder. I think if they had better justice..." Ruby furthered Jesus' argument incorporating Aristotle's thoughts on good and bad fortune. I think justice don't got nothing to do with somebody getting blamed for murder if they did not or did it. It is probably because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time or the evidence. Justice is, I think...just judging whether it is right or wrong, that's it. Rosa integrated Ruby's thoughts on bad fortune regarding justice in terms of where she lived, opinions on race, and outsiders' perceptions of her community. There is not a lot of justice in communities where we live because of our color, or how we live, so people like us don't get a lot of justice because of our color. Like I'm not being racist or nothing, but white people, say if I'm convicted of killing somebody and a white person is convicted of killing somebody, they are going to look at me wrong because I'm a different color. But I might not have done it and the white person could have done it. There is no justice for me.

SUMMARY OF THE OVERALL FINDINGS

The Urban Middle School students who participated in this study perceived virtue as goodness in connection to the Aristotelian construction of the good life, the good person, and the good society. They described knowing virtue through internal self-determination or intuitions. They also said that when considering actions they thought about potential consequences as well as their feelings and the feelings of others. These students discussed three of Aristotle's moral virtues. Courage was said to be good and they agreed with Aristotle that it included not being foolhardy. The moral virtue truth was perceived as good but questioned in relation to hurting other peoples' feelings, especially those they cared about. They also questioned truth when not telling the truth kept them out of trouble. They saw the goodness of patience and struggled to determine the right time and the right place to let out their anger as well as alternatives to releasing anger in a hurtful or negative way. The students perceived virtue, according to an Aristotelian perspective, in relationship to justice and friendship.

The students perceived virtuous acts, according to an Aristotelian perspective, to be service oriented. They articulated observing others doing virtuous acts of service, as well as their own virtuous acts, which included helping family, helping friends, and doing community service. These urban middle school students discussed Aristotle's thoughts on choice and perceived virtuous acts as related to choices and decision making. Virtuous decisions, they said, were determined by considering consequences, intent, and friendship. Making the wrong choices was attributed to bad or wrong decisions such as doing what was the most fun rather than what was good. Being curious about

experiencing life and/or being caught up in the excitement of the moment were also described as factors that get in the way of making virtuous choices.

Urban Middle School students perceived virtue, according to an Aristotelian perspective, as reflected in the cultural milieu of their school, as actions resulting in the good for individuals as well as for the common good. This good is enacted through teaching and learning. Virtuous acts were enacted by teachers, security guards, and custodians. Virtue was said to be hampered within the school by unfair and unjust acts, marginal happiness, and external negative community forces.

Urban Middle School students perceived virtue and virtuous actions within society, according to an Aristotelian perspective, as justice enacted by following the rules. Virtue, as it is reflected in goodness, was seen enacted within the community by acts of service for the good of individuals and the common good. The students perceived virtue and virtuous actions within society hindered by alienating factors of difference related to acts of racism and acts of prejudice. Virtue was also perceived as justice hindered by unfair and unjust acts and actions.

CONCLUSIONS

As was shown in this limited study, students are capable of understanding and discussing Aristotelian thought. A curriculum for all middle schools that promotes thoughtful inquiry through the discussion of primary source texts on virtue would promote critical thought, empowerment, and as Adler (1988) suggested, provide a foundation to begin to answer the question, how best to live one's life. This researcher recommends participatory action research as an approach for middle school students to study virtue and its relationship to the good life as perceived by Aristotle as a means for moral development. Giving students a voice in the dialogue on character revealed a great deal of information worthy of attention. As seen in this study, urban middle school students bring a wealth of experience and understanding to a discussion on virtue. Conversations with urban middle school youth on virtue were shown to be meaningful, rich, and enlightening. The students listened with care and concern for each other, even to the point of often finishing each others sentences. They listened and pondered Aristotelian wisdom on virtue agreeing with Plato and Aristotle at times and completely disagreeing, passionately and thoughtfully, with them on more than one occasion. During the focus group meetings, the room was full of energy. Students were there to think and to advise the researcher. They were there to be listened to because their thoughts and experiences mattered. A sense of excitement and importance prevailed. They spoke of a lack of virtue within their school and articulated personal experiences as well as the experiences of others they know regarding injustice within the community that society still must address. Truly, these students formed a virtuous community amongst themselves as they debated Aristotelian thought. And now through you their part in the dialogue on virtue carries on.

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