

# GENIUS TIME: ENHANCING SELF-AWARENESS IN GRADE 2 BOYS THROUGH STUDENT CHOICE

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## Abstract

This paper examines the impact of student-led, character-based inquiry projects on students' self-awareness. Over the course of four months, a class of 17 Grade 2 boys developed and pursued "Genius Time" inquiry projects and explicitly linked their work to character strengths. In an attempt to help students develop a deeper understanding of character traits, opportunities for student choice and agency were incorporated into the project action. A comparative study of questionnaires and self-assessments as well as observations and interviews allowed a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of the intervention.

Upon analysis of the project outcomes, it was apparent that the boys gained a deeper understanding of a wider array of character strengths than they expected, learned from their peers, and developed a growth mindset with regards to the character strengths. These findings suggest a connection between student agency and more meaningful learning pertaining to character education.

## Glossary

*Inquiry Project:* For the purposes of this investigation, inquiry project encompasses the concept of inquiry in accordance with the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2013) understanding as the pedagogical approach towards learning that "places students' questions, ideas and observations at the centre of the learning experience...involve[ing] open-ended investigations into a question or a problem, requiring them to engage in evidence-based reasoning and creative problem-solving, as well as 'problem finding'" (p. 2). More specifically, an inquiry project is defined as an investigation into an area of choice designed and pursued by students with educators acting as a support rather than a guide.

*Character-Driven:* The term "character" may be defined as a complex set of psychological characteristics, formed in part by growth in cognition that enables a person to act as a moral agent (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). More specifically, it refers to the character strengths as delineated by Seligman and Peterson in *Character Strengths and Virtues* (2004). By delineating "character" more explicitly as a composition of twenty-four strengths (see Figure 1), students are able to independently select, record, and measure their own character strengths at the outset of their inquiry project as well as throughout their investigation.



Figure 1: VIA Character Traits, VIA Institute on Character, 2019

### Introduction

Over the past four years, The Sterling Hall School in Toronto has actively implemented a character education program using the VIA character classifications model created by Seligman and Peterson (2004) in *Character Strengths and Virtues*. This model focuses on positive psychology and assigns a common vocabulary to the concept of “character.” The school has utilized this model as a way to boost character education for boys.

With Sterling Hall’s focus on character, the boys have developed a vernacular surrounding character traits and strengths, yet there remains a lack of self-awareness when it comes to boys recognizing their own strengths and deficits. This past year, Sterling Hall School included student self-reflections as part of our reporting process. We noticed that students in the Primary grades were repeatedly selecting the same character traits and these were often the same traits chosen by their peers. This finding led me to realize that we had a problem with boys’ self-awareness when it comes to our character education program.

I implemented a student-led program wherein students could self-identify strengths that they hoped to develop and then could pursue their own inquiry project with those strengths in mind. In previous years, inquiry projects were often completed in small groups and tied to units of study in the curriculum. For the purposes of this project, I created a new time block in the class schedule that the boys designated as “Genius Time.” During that time, boys investigated, experimented with, and shared their findings on a topic of their choosing, regardless of the curriculum. The boys chose topics and questions that they were passionate about. The only caveat was that they had to connect their chosen area of study to the VIA Character Strengths that they felt they needed to develop. Consequently, I developed the following research question: *How does a character-driven inquiry project develop self-awareness in Grade 2 boys?*

I hoped successful development would see students demonstrate a more thorough understanding of the VIA character strengths and an ability to connect the strengths to personal experiences through greater self-awareness. I defined self-awareness as “an awareness of one’s own personality or individuality” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2019), with the understanding that students should not only be able to name the character strengths detailed above, but also be able to describe them as they relate to their own experiences in the inquiry project .

Action research was the most appropriate methodology for my project as, according to Mertler (2017), it is a form of research that brings about results that are immediate and with direct application. Since my investigation directly involved the rest of the Primary division and had implications for our Junior and Intermediate divisions, action research provided timely but effective feedback for myself and my peers regarding potentially beneficial educational practices for our character program.

### **Literature Review**

Character education has long been at the heart of educational practice. Theorists from Aristotle to Dewey have supported the idea that education’s greater purpose is the shaping of character, with Dewey (1944) stating that “it is a commonplace of educational theory that the establishing of character is a comprehensive aim of school instruction and discipline” (p. 346).

Contemporary researchers support this historical ideology (Brooks & Thompson, 2005; Chang, 1994; Doyle, 1997; Sockett, 1993) by suggesting that traditional curriculum is only important so long as it serves to develop the moral character of children. This is epitomized by the words of Ginott (as cited in Brooks & Thompson, 2005) who says, “reading, writing and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more humane” (p. 51).

Character education is not touted as worthwhile purely for historical or moral reasons. Rather, there is a growing body of research that supports character education as a means of promoting

greater successes across educational aims. In 2006, Ontario initiated the Character Development Initiative upon the understanding that character education improves school engagement (The Early School Leavers Report, 2005), builds strong citizens (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Gardner, 1999), as well as improves academic success (Parker, 2003; Parker, et al., 2004). The link was quickly made between character development and a myriad of essential educational benefits and is indicative of the twenty-first society trend towards Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). Researchers, such as Elias (2006), tout SEL and character education for the effects they have in increasing academic achievement of children, decreasing incidences of problem behaviors, improving the relationships that surround each child, and the positive changes in the climate of classrooms and schools.

Despite programs such as the Character Development Initiative, character education has fallen by the wayside in Ontario. Recently in Ontario a variety of universities and independent boys schools have come under fire for a lack of character and moral development resulting in public scandals. According to the Josephson Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth, there is a serious need to integrate character education in school systems as character deficiency has become endemic in the youth of today (Josephson Institute, 2012). Author Michael Ian Black's (2018) essay for *The New York Times* described this current climate with this statement:

Too many boys are trapped in the same suffocating, outdated model of masculinity, where manhood is measured in strength, where there is no way to be vulnerable without being emasculated, where manliness is about having power over others. They are trapped, and they don't even have the language to talk about how they feel about being trapped. (para. 7)

Black's sentiment epitomizes the contemporary atmosphere surrounding single-sex schools, particularly boys' schools, with growing concern over the age-old axiom of "boys will be boys." As a result, character education has become increasingly fundamental to our educational system.

Despite the evidence to support the importance of character education and the growing need for effective character development, there remains a dearth of research surrounding how best to facilitate it. The 2006 Character Development Initiative recognized that, "character cannot be acquired passively, nor can it be delivered solely as units of curriculum" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 8), yet was not forthcoming about the definition of character or a specific theoretical framework. In an effort to "develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours that students require to become caring and socially responsible members of society" (pg. 8), as mandated by the Ontario Ministry, The Sterling Hall School has embraced a character education

program. However, there remains a lack of research surrounding best practices with regards to promoting students' understanding of character and deeper self-awareness.

When investigating best-practice surrounding contemporary educational pedagogy, the themes of agency and inquiry are abundant. Just as character has been seen as an aim of education throughout history, student agency is gaining ground as an imperative element of education. Leadbeater (2017) states that the goal of education should now be "for the young to become purposeful, reflective, responsible, capable agents of change" (p. 13). Many researchers (Cook-Sather, 2014; Robertson, 2017; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Williams, 2017) have noted that when students have agency in their learning, they are "more motivated, experience greater satisfaction in their learning, and, consequently, are more likely to achieve academic success" (Lin-Siegler et al., 2016, p. 297). In redefining traditional power relationships away from the banking system of education, students are being given a voice which can have a positive effect on their academics and learning skills.

One method routinely cited as a positive recourse for ensuring student agency is inquiry learning. Championed by educators and researchers alike (Comber, 2013; Hannay et al., 2010; Timperley & Lee, 2008), inquiry learning is described as a means to "support and facilitate students' autonomy and engagement with their learning" (Ferguson et al., 2011, p. 56), while simultaneously developing more meaningful learning. With the power to support purposeful and deeper learning, inquiry-based learning has the potential to impact character education and development in schools.

Another cardinal element of student agency and self-awareness is the use of self-assessment throughout the inquiry process. With research supporting self-assessment as a useful tool for increased academic performance (Black & Williams, 2006), motivation and engagement (Griffiths & Davies, 1999), and meta-cognitive skills (Brown, 2014), there is ample evidence to suggest the power of student agency in this form. Furthermore, although the validity of self-assessment is variable based on students' realism (Brown & Harris, 2013), self-assessment has been seen to help students develop greater awareness of their work and themselves (Brown & Harris, 2014). Coupled with the research surrounding inquiry-based learning, the studies on self-assessment lend themselves to the overwhelming power of student agency with regards to self-awareness and deeper learning. A recent study conducted with pre-service teachers combined the power of self-assessment with inquiry in the study of character education and found that learning about character through inquiry and self-assessment allowed for deeper personal studies (Perez, 2011). The results of this study suggest that the results of character education can be affected when combined with student agency.

## **Research Context**

I conducted this study at The Sterling Hall School in North York, Toronto. The participants were 17 boys from my homeroom class, ranging between the ages of six to eight years-old. The boys all lived locally and tended to come from affluent backgrounds. The majority of these students (15 of the 17) had received at least one year of exposure to, and direct instruction about, the VIA character strengths as detailed previously.

The action took place during Term 1; specifically during periods of time spent within the homeroom time of which I am the primary teacher. Lessons on character strengths were already built into each morning's schedule, with 30 minutes allocated to social-emotional learning time. I gave the boys approximately one hour of each week to pursue their inquiry project, with outside time allotted for reflection and self-assessment of character strengths. I chose this class, because these boys spend the majority of the school day in homeroom with me and experience dictated that this, coupled with the flexibility of the homeroom schedule, would allow for ample time to complete the project.

I obtained permission to conduct my research at the beginning of the school year following an open conversation with both the boys and parents about the project. Students were guaranteed that their names would not be attached to any quotes or data utilized in the final project and that a letter would be assigned to their names at the beginning of the project so that they could complete tasks anonymously.

## **The Action**

The action consisted of two main steps, the first being a frontloading of knowledge that enabled students to be more independent during the proposed action. The boys needed to gain an understanding of the inquiry cycle before they could engage in their own student-led inquiry projects. The first two weeks of the term were spent working as a group to explore the different cycles of an inquiry unit, following Kath Murdoch's (2019) seven steps (see Figure 2).

I taught the Inquiry Cycle both explicitly and through the exploration of the question: What is the most effective configuration of our classroom? In doing so, students gained insight into the inquiry process in order to be informed for their own projects.

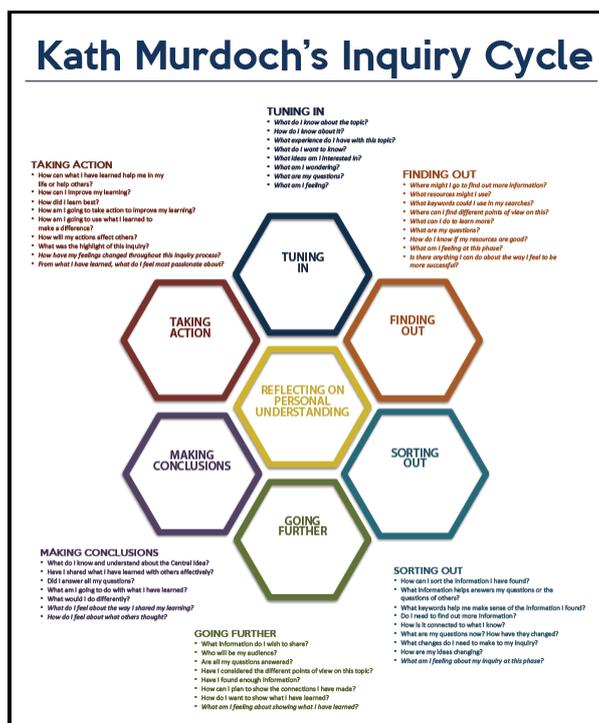


Figure 2: Kath Murdoch's Inquiry Cycle (2019)

The second step of the action was two-fold and continued through the rest of the term. The boys selected the character strengths that they already felt they possessed and chose a character strength or two that they felt they needed or wanted to develop. In conjunction with this task, they selected a topic for their own inquiry project that they believed would foster their chosen character strengths. So as not to stifle the direction of these projects or the character strengths that students selected, I left the possible directions of inquiry open to the students as long as they were able to make a connection with their chosen character strengths. Boys' choices in topics varied widely, from developing curiosity and leadership through researching lions, to developing teamwork and perspective by creating a mobility device for a grandparent, to developing prudence and perseverance by learning to sew a stuffed animal.

Throughout the ensuing months, the one-hour time slots each week consisted of the following elements: reviewing guiding inquiry questions and/or goals, pursuing the inquiry cycle, regularly checking-in with me and self-assessing, as well participating in regular peer-to-peer presentations and sharing opportunities. The boys referred to this time as their "Genius Time." It was a fluid time period, wherein the boys participated in any of the aforementioned elements on a given day. Additionally, throughout this action research period, several boys completed their initial project and initiated another.

## **Data Collection**

Data were gathered through a variety of methods and from a range of sources. I chose to incorporate both qualitative and quantitative methods in a mixed-methods design, as “the consideration of both types of data ... provides better understanding of the research problem than either type of data alone” (Mertler, 2017, p. 105-106).

To begin, I was curious about the boys’ self-assessment of their character strengths, as I hoped to gauge the impact of an inquiry project upon their pre-existing understanding. As a result, I conducted a series of surveys and collected the boys’ self-assessments. The first was an open-ended survey to ascertain the boys’ views on their character strengths and weaknesses.

Following this, they completed a closed-response survey with a Likert scale rating system (see Appendix A). As a result, I was able to obtain what Mertler (2017) describes as a “snapshot” (p. 99) of my students’ self-assessment of their character. At the conclusion of the project, the boys completed a second set of surveys, allowing me to compare and cross-reference their responses with the initial surveys (see Appendix B.).

Throughout the project, I conducted a series of semi-structured and informal interviews to gain a sense of the boys’ changing self-awareness (see Appendix C). Semi-structured interview questions allowed me to guide conversations, while enabling individual students to expand on their responses. I utilized different styles of interviews in order to probe further and ask for clarification, while simultaneously allowing a means for participation for my young participants who were unable to share their awareness via writing (Mertler, 2017, pp. 137-138).

Additionally, the interviews I conducted and shared with my students allowed for member-checking and for the analysis of negative cases.

Once a week, I also asked the boys to complete a “ticket-out-the-door” to self-assess their character development that week (see Appendix D). I included this regular self-assessment because “self-assessment leads a student to a greater awareness and understanding of himself ... as a learner” (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 3). This regular self-assessment was supported by my own field notes, which gave direction to my understanding of the patterns being seen throughout the action research.

## **Data Analysis**

To ensure the consistency of my results, I utilized triangulation and ensured that I employed “a variety of instruments, methods, and sources to collect data ... to enhance the validity of [the] findings” (Mertler, 2017, p. 141). The data collected were analyzed using mostly thematic analysis. I coded the results of the open-ended surveys and then organized them into a series of categories regarding different character strengths and level of self-assessment. As a result, I was

able to compare these with the frequency and percentages seen in the answers to the closed-response surveys and to look for the underlying themes (Mertler, 2017). The results of the final surveys were treated in a similar manner, allowing me to note the changes both in the Likert scale answers and the patterns of the open-ended surveys.

Analysis of the video recordings allowed me to code the responses and group them by similarities in terms of emerging patterns, character strengths, and change. Following this process, I compared the patterns and changes noted in the interviews with the coded results and percentages gleaned from the surveys as well as those patterns and observations noted in my field notes in order to triangulate the data.

### **Discussion of Results**

Throughout the course of this project and during the analysis of the data, four major themes emerged with regards to how the boys' character-driven inquiry project developed their self-awareness. The boys noted that they developed different character strengths than expected, learned about character strengths from their peers' projects, and established a deeper understanding of those character strengths while forming a growth mindset.

#### **New and Different Character Strengths**

At the outset of the project, the boys sought to utilize an inquiry project to develop a specific character strength. They learned the definition of a particular strength and recorded what they already knew about it and if they had any prior examples of said character strength. As the project progressed, the vast majority of students noted in their interviews and exit tickets how they were simultaneously developing a range of character strengths as a result of their project. One boy who was keen to develop his perseverance while working with a peer to build a phone noted:

I was surprised because I developed my teamwork better than my perseverance. I like to be a leader but when you work with a friend you need to listen to them and take turns. You can't just do what you want... I can try to use that idea in math when I am problem solving. I can listen to my partner and not just solve the question. Then I can learn different things. That's also part of being a good leader.

This statement encapsulates the revelation that was felt by so many other students. While they had set out to each develop a specific character strength, more than three-quarters of the class noted that they had developed new character strengths that they were previously unaware of and had not intended on developing.

The growth of new character strengths was also apparent in an analysis of the changes in students' self-reflections. Almost all of those boys had added new character strengths to their self-reflections. The character strengths that these students reported on were the same as those that they had noted in their interviews and "ticket-out-the-door" during their Genius Projects. One of these boys observed:

I know what the strengths mean much better now. Last year I show love of learning always. Now I show kindness by doing teamwork in genius time when I help the other boys. This was surprised. I didn't know that I showed this a lot, but I do. The genius project helps me see when I show things that I did not have before.

This growth was indicative of the changes observed by many of his peers.

### **Learning About Character From Our Peers**

While the boys were developing new character strengths, they also noted that their understanding of character strengths was fortified by their peers' projects. Every few weeks, the boys had an opportunity to present what they were working on to the class. During this time, the boys were simultaneously completing a "ticket-out-the-door" each week and reflecting on examples of different character strengths. Over the course of the project, the examples that the boys cited changed. Initially, 17 of the 18 boys merely gave a definition or cited examples related to the stories that we read in class. By the end of the project, 17 of the 18 boys gave examples influenced equally by their own experiences and those of their peers.

During the final survey of the project, several students noted that their understanding of character strengths had been strengthened by their peers' presentations. One boy stated:

When L. shared I learned so much 'bout curiosity. That wasn't the strength he wanted to build, but he did! He was so excited to know more about technology. I have that with comics but I didn't know it [was curiosity]. And W. showed prudence because he didn't rush with his 3D printing but made a lot of prototypes when he just wanted to be done.

According to Gary Ladd (2005), when students enter school, and as they mature, their sense of self and knowledge are increasingly affected by their peers rather than by familial or adult relationships. By presenting their work and character strengths to each other, the boys engaged in a powerful opportunity to influence each others' character development, which often led to an ability to recognize character strengths in themselves.

## **A Deeper Understanding of Character Strengths**

Working on Genius Projects and sharing their progress with each other provided the boys with relevant and real examples of different strengths that, according to one-third of the class, were the most meaningful way to learn about character at school or at home. These opportunities enriched their understanding of character strengths overall, providing them with salient experiences. One boy developed his prudence over the course of his project and observed:

I like to finish things fast and Ms. Cowan always says I need to add more detail or check my work and show prudence... there were A LOT of steps to do [for my Genius Project].... It took awhile but I had to do all the steps so that my project could be ok. I didn't really get it when teachers talked about prudence before, it more felt annoying. But now I get it and I can show it.

The sentiment of finally “getting it” and having felt or seen a character strength registered with the majority of the class. In a comparison of the introductory and final surveys, 15 of 18 students noted that their ability to think of relevant examples of each strength had increased.

Furthermore, the changes in the boys’ examples given in their weekly “ticket-out-the-door” reflected this growth. By the final week, boys from almost the entire class were citing personal experiences and examples when asked about character strengths. They were beginning to recognize how character strengths could be applied outside of their Genius Projects, as was noted by the boy working on a phone who recognized the potential for teamwork in Mathematics.

## **Developing a Growth Mindset**

Several of the boys noted that their project enabled them to take on a growth mindset with regards to character strengths. Throughout the interviews, self-reflections and “ticket-out-the-door” activities, many of the boys referred to their desire to improve certain character strengths. In an interview, one of the boys reflected that, “character strengths are like muscles. We have to use them to grow them and I really need to grow my self-regulation muscle.” At some point in the project, a quarter of the boys reflected on the process of “growing” or “working on” their character strengths, rather than stating the strengths that they had shown.

While not as wide-spread a theme as those previously mentioned, this growth mindset was a trend that impacted the boys’ self reflections on their report cards and caused a decided shift in the language used by many of the boys. Rather than listing the character strengths they knew they showed, many commented on the strengths that they were “working on” and the subjects that were linked to this strength. As a result, 10 of the 18 self-reflections were not only focused on the boys’ accomplishments, but reflected hope and a desire to continue to strengthen their

abilities.

### **Conclusions**

In summary, the character-based inquiry project provided the boys with meaningful opportunities to explore character strengths as well as develop and learn more about different character strengths. This in turn, enabled students to form a deeper understanding and the ability for more meaningful self-reflection and growth.

The implications of this project beyond the results for my students were two-fold. Firstly, it demonstrated the potential that student voice and choice has in the classroom. Beyond the implications this had for character-development and self-assessment, the results and student enthusiasm suggest that student-led projects can encourage more growth and zeal for learning than more traditional modes of class projects.

Secondly, this project has inspired the potential for future research in two areas. Primarily, there remains a dearth of exploration and research when it comes to best practices for character education. While its inherent importance has been widely recognized, this project made it evident that there remains room for growth in the educational field when it comes to the mode through which character education is incorporated in the classroom. Further action research is required to explore other means of encouraging character education more broadly.

In addition, I believe that it would be valuable to explore other program areas in a Primary classroom wherein a student-led “Genius Time” might be beneficial. Because my focus was slated towards self-assessment and character education for this project, the boys’ reflections were primarily concerned with character development. However, more research into curricular areas that could be affected by such a project is warranted.

### **Reflection Statement**

Conducting this action research project was a very rewarding and enriching experience, both personally and professionally. It allowed me the time and focus to be inspired to make a change in my regular practice. I began this action research having taught Grade 2 for nine years and I was in need of a change to reinvigorate my practice. With the implementation of student-led inquiry projects one hour each week, the whole week seemed to change; both the boys and myself found ourselves looking forward to that hour and then planning for the next one. This action research gave me permission to explore and have fun in the classroom. I was motivated to do what I always encourage in my students: try something new, make a few mistakes, and learn something!

Most importantly, this project reminded me of the importance of partnering with and learning from my students. The boys took to this project with vigour, and I was surprised by the level of enthusiasm, independence, and growth that these seven-year olds showed. I was surprised at the depth of understanding and knowledge that can be gleaned from such a relatively small change, both for myself and my students.

I am incredibly grateful for the communities of support that surrounded this project. Supporting 18 boys through their independent inquiry projects was a bigger undertaking and a more demanding task than I had expected. Many of my peers leaned in with their knowledge and time to support the boys as they chose to develop very particular skills. As a result of my peers' patience and generosity, the Grade 2 boys had free-reign of the science lab, makerspace, and art room during their "Genius Time," with many teachers offering their skills in knitting, sewing, wood-work and so much more. The constraints of curricular time and student independence were overcome with the help of this community.

Additionally, I had the support of the IBSC community. My peers, and mentor, Laura, made this an incredibly enriching and enjoyable experience. While I had not participated in action research previously and tend to be constantly in need of editing support to be brief, not once did I feel the strains of overburden. This is entirely due to the camaraderie and support of my IBSC group.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Introductory Survey

Name:

Genius Project:

Character Strength to focus on:

#### VIA Classification of Character Strengths



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	1	2	3	4	5
	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I have a good understanding of the character strengths					
1. I can think of examples of many of the character strengths					
2. I know the definition of the character strength I have chosen for my genius project					

<p>3. I can think of an example of a time that I used the character strength</p>					
<p>4. My genius project will help me experience my character strength</p>					
<p>Other comments</p>					

## Appendix B: Final survey

Name:

Genius Project:

Character Strength that you are working on:

### VIA Classification of Character Strengths



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	1	2	3	4	5
	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1.I have a good understanding of the character strengths					
2.I can think of examples of many of the character strengths					
3. I know the definition of the character strength I chose for my genius project					

4. I can think of an example of a time that I used the character strength in my project					
5. My genius project has helped me experience my character strength					
Were there any surprises? Did you learn more about different character strengths?					

## Appendix C: Interview Questions

What is your genius project?

What are some successes that you have had in your project?

What are any difficulties you have faced in your project?

What character strength are you developing?

How has the project helped you develop that strength?

Are there other character strengths that it has helped develop? How?

Have you noticed what the other boys are working on? Tell me about it?

What else would you like me to know about Genius Time project?

## Appendix D: Ticket-Out-The-Door

### Ticket-out-the-Door

Pick a character strength (circle it)

### VIA Classification of Character Strengths



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Give an example of that strength: