

April 2017

### Approaches to the Development of Character: Proceedings of a Workshop

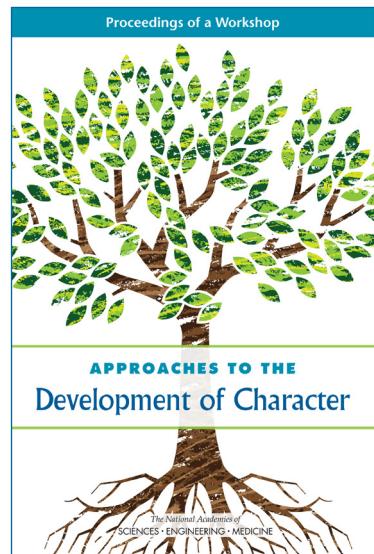
Out-of-school programs in academics, sports, service, and other activities can foster the development of skills and attributes that young people need to flourish in school, the workplace, and their personal lives. Programs that include character development as part of their mission vary widely: they include boys and girls clubs; outdoor learning, arts, and science programs; mentoring and advocacy or service groups; and many more. They take place in venues including schools, museums, and community-based organizations, but what links them is their commitment to helping young people develop.

Whether the designers and leaders of such programs describe their work as building character, promoting positive development, or fostering social and emotional learning, they are eager to learn about promising practices used in other settings, evidence of effectiveness, and ways to measure the effectiveness of their own approaches.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine held a workshop to review available research on character development, with the aim of supporting the adults who design, run, and administer out-of-school programs. The planning committee commissioned six scholars to synthesize and present research on key questions, and additional experts to respond to their presentations; the presentations and discussions are summarized more completely in *Approaches to the Development of Character: Proceedings of a Workshop*.

#### DEFINING AND UNDERSTANDING CHARACTER

Larry Nucci of the University of California, Berkeley, presented his paper on past ideas about the nature and definition of character and explained why he sees it not as a set of attributes but as one aspect of an individual's overall sense of self. He described moral agency—the capacity to base one's actions on goals and beliefs about morality—as the essence of character. He found



that character is based on four elements: the capacity to make moral distinctions, emotional and mental health, self-regulation, and the capacity to take a critical moral stance.

- Discussant Robert McGrath of Fairleigh Dickinson University explained his view that character is an objective and universal concept and that character education is more than a method for convincing people to comply with social conventions. He identified three virtues that research suggests are universal: caring, inquisitiveness, and self-control.
- Kristina Schmid Callina of Tufts University argued that character is a function of continuous interactions between an individual and his or her social and cultural context. She argued that programs should work to develop coherence in young people—the capacity to display “the right virtue, in the right amount, at the right time”—rather than particular traits.
- Carola Suárez-Orozco of the University of California, Los Angeles, explained that understanding the relationship between culture and character requires close examination of a particular population—accomplished through multimethod approaches. Social scientists often reduce complex societies into simplistic categories that can be misleading, she said.

## IDENTIFYING WHAT WORKS IN DEVELOPING CHARACTER

Marvin Berkowitz of the University of Missouri, St. Louis, reviewed evidence of what works in character development. He found that promoting healthy environments in which adults model good character and actively foster young people’s development is the most effective approach. He identified program strategies for which there is evidence of effectiveness: prioritizing character education, developing positive relationships, developing young people’s intrinsic motivation, modeling good character, empowering young people, and helping young people develop social and emotional competence.

- Discussant Reed Larson of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign identified “key ingredients” that are effective in programs for older youth: the opportunity to grapple with challenges, including moral challenges; encouragement to invest time and energy in meaningful goals; and the development of constructive peer relationships.
- Camille Farrington of the University of Chicago drew on research to show that opportunities for both action (e.g., encountering new modes of behavior, being able to explore in a safe



**Figure 1** Developmental experiences that lead to positive development.

Source: Nagaoka, J., Farrington, C.A., Ehrlich, S.B., and Heath, R.D. (2015). *Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. Available: <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications-foundations-young-adult-success-developmental-framework> [December 2016].

space, and developing skills) and reflection (the chance to internalize and derive the meaning of experiences) are vital to the development of character. (see Figure 1).

- Karen Pittman of the Forum for Youth Investment highlighted the importance of engaging all of the adults in a program or school in helping young people develop character. The "secret sauce," in her view is to help adults both model and nurture moral behavior, creating an environment that is safe and in which young people are engaged, challenged, and rewarded for their efforts.

## IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

Joseph Durlak of Loyola University Chicago discussed research on effective program implementation, which he regards as vital. He found that program success is dependent on four elements: fidelity, the degree to which the major components of the program have been faithfully delivered; dosage, how much of the program is delivered; the quality of the delivery (how well or competently the program is conducted); and adaptations made to the original program. Effective attention to these essentials requires collaboration among program leaders, funders, and others, as well as commitment and resources.

William Trochim of Cornell University reviewed research on program evaluation, and noted that few organizations place a priority on it or have the resources to do it effectively, despite its importance. He argued that organizations should explicitly identify norms to help staff in thinking collectively about their work. Doing so can foster a climate in which staff members pose thoughtful questions and reflect on how their program functions, the experiences of different stakeholders, and the outcomes for the young people involved, he explained.

- Discussant Mike Surbaugh of the Boy Scouts of America agreed that few programs have the opportunity to collect useful data about their effectiveness, and expressed the hope that collaboration and sharing of ideas and information will help more programs incorporate character-building practices into their activities.
- Donald Floyd of the National 4-H Council (retired) noted that investing in implementation and evaluation is difficult for out-of-school programs because program leaders have many competing priorities and little time to develop expertise with research and evaluation. They

also have few incentives to collaborate with other organizations with whom they compete for young people's attention.

Deborah Moroney of the American Institute for Research examined research on the out-of-school workforce. Qualified, well-prepared youth workers play a key role by recruiting young people to programs and sustaining their interest, developing positive relationships with them, and mentoring them, she noted. However, there is a lot of turnover in the out-of-school workforce, and the compensation and other supports are inconsistent. Better support for these workers would benefit programs and the young people who participate.

- Discussant Noelle Hurd of the University of Virginia noted that structured activities that allow young people to build trusting relationships are important for adolescents. She explained that adults who work with young people need training in respecting youth voices and thinking critically about social context—especially adults who work with young people who experience disadvantage and racism.
- Rob Jagers of the University of Michigan said that out-of-school settings are ideal places for young people to learn to identify and analyze challenges and to plan their responses to those challenges with the guidance of trained adults. He suggested that adults can use the tools of critical consciousness to empower young people and engage them in advocacy.
- Mary Keller of the Military Child Education Coalition Experience emphasized the importance of consistent supports for highly mobile populations such as military children. Youth workers need professional development to help them integrate ideas about mobile children's social and emotional development into their work.

## MEASURING CHARACTER

Noel Card of the University of Connecticut reviewed the methodological issues in measuring growth and development related to character. He noted that because character is difficult to define precisely, it is also difficult to measure. The methods for doing so involve tradeoffs that must be clearly understood by those who use the results, including other researchers as well as program leaders, staff, and funders. He believes discussion of psychometric properties should be part of the reporting of the results of assessments of character.

- Clark McKown of Rush University Medical Center agreed and noted that even if the field cannot reach consensus in defining character, it would be helpful to have a common language and metrics for researchers and others to use. Clearer definitions would help researchers match assessments to the question they hope to answer.
- Nancy Deutsch of the University of Virginia emphasized the importance of context to understanding an individuals' behavior. She argued that a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods is needed to explore the “broad, complex domain of character.”

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**For More Information...** This Workshop Highlights was prepared by the Board on Testing and Assessment based on *Approaches to the Development of Character: Proceedings of a Workshop* (2017). The workshop was sponsored by the S.D. Bechtel, Jr., Foundation. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization or agency that provided support for the project. Copies of the report are available from the National Academies Press, (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nap.edu> or via the Website at <http://nas.edu/character-education>.

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