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CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN YOUTH PROGRAMS

Lessons from Developmental Science Research and Practice

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There is growing emphasis on character development in the research and practice of youth development (e.g., Ettekal et al., 2015). Much of the scholarship on character, at least as it relates to youth programs, is framed within a positive youth development (PYD) perspective. PYD, as a developmental process, occurs through mutually beneficial exchanges between youth and their multiple, nested contexts, termed adaptive person ⇔ context relations (Lerner et al., 2014). Primary contexts known to foster PYD and to be ecological assets for youth are voluntary, out-of-school time (OST) youth programs (Vandell et al., 2015). Indeed, many programs explicitly aim to foster in youth the ability to contribute positively to themselves and their societies and such positive contributions can be broadly understood as reflecting PYD. Within the set of mutually beneficial person ⇔ context relations which constitute PYD, some instances additionally engage youth moral agency (Berkowitz, 2012; Nucci, 2017) and may be construed as demonstrations of "character" (Lerner & Callina, 2014; Lerner et al., 2022).

Our goal in this chapter is to expound on the conception of "character" within the context of programs provided by youth-serving organizations (YSOs) and as it relates to youth development research and practice. We therefore first provide a conceptual presentation of character as a construct and process, and then describe youth programs and the various ways in which character development is approached by YSOs. Finally, we address the major challenges related to character development research and practice in the context of youth programs. We conclude by summarizing the main takeaways for researchers and practitioners interested in fostering character development through participation in youth programs.

Before turning to our discussion of character, it is important to note that across the landscape of YSOs with explicit PYD goals, there is widespread emphasis on the development of positive contributions to youth and society, generally, and on the development of positive character attributes, specifically. However, different organizations prioritize different sets of contributions and many use the term "character" without clear definition. Therefore, we seek to acknowledge both the ways in which programs contribute to the development of youth character and the diversity of meanings encapsulated by the term "character."

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Character is a heterogeneous concept and, as well, youth programs are heterogeneous. Thus, it is reasonable to encounter a variety of conceptualizations and operationalizations of character in youth programs. Recognition and understanding of the variation in how character is conceptualized and applied in youth programs is important for research on character development and for appropriate application in program settings. Importantly, the acknowledgment of heterogeneity in the use of the term "character" does not imply the need for a singular, shared definition, but rather the need for clarity in the use of the term and for explicit definitions applied to specific contexts (Lerner et al., 2022). Working toward specificity around the concept of "character" as it is used in both research and practice can enable more effective promotion of such positive contributions through youth programs (Lerner et al., 2021).

Therefore, as a launch point, we provide a general, overarching definition of character as a set of mutually beneficial (adaptive) person ⇔ context relations that enable individuals to engage the social world as moral agents (Lerner et al., 2022). Although we unpack the nuances of this definition of character in the following section, there is also a need to acknowledge our assumption of the purpose of character, given the broad and perhaps abstract nature of our definition. That is, we assume that researchers and practitioners are interested in character for the purpose of enhancing the person as well as society. If a goal of developmental science is to optimize development (Lerner et al., 2014), which involves both person and context, then character development can be one way that optimization is achieved. Of course, there may be disagreement in the scholarship about what constitutes moral action; we underscore a social justice approach which suggests that character development (i.e., the set of mutually beneficial person ⇔ context relations involving moral action) involves improving conditions for all and, in particular, for the individuals and groups who are systematically deprived (Lerner et al., 2010). As such, a better understanding of character development and its promotion in youth programs can facilitate progress toward positively developing youth and society.

What Is Character and How Is It Developed?

To understand character development, we begin by defining development and then attending to what is being developed (i.e., character). According to contemporary developmental theory, development involves exchanges between person and context, termed person ⇔ context relations (Lerner et al., 2014; Overton, 2013). That is, individuals are not biologically predetermined agents navigating a separable social world; nor are individuals biologically or genetically deprived structures whose life course is determined solely by the social worlds within which they find themselves. Instead, the development of individuals involves their biology, the social world in which they are embedded, and the mutually influential exchanges between the two (Lerner et al., 2014; Overton, 2013). When such exchanges are *mutually beneficial*, such that the person benefits the context and the context supports the person, positive development occurs. Positive development or, in other words, optimizing the course of life of human beings is a central goal of developmental science (Lerner et al., 2014). Thus, it is unsurprising that there is a substantial research base on positive development, which includes a range of representative terms, such as flourishing, thriving, and well-being (Bowers et al., 2014; Howell et al., 2013; King et al., 2005; Lerner et al., 2010; Scales et al., 2011).

When the developmental process involving mutually beneficial person ⇔ context relations is applied to the study or practice of working with youth, it is termed positive youth development (PYD; Lerner et al., 2014). In the scholarly literature, PYD has been used to represent a developmental process, an approach to designing youth programs, or an instance of a program purported to

foster PYD (Hamilton, 1999). Our definition of character is nested within the conception of PYD as a developmental process. That is, PYD is a specific set of person ⇔ context relations (i.e., the set in which a youth benefits their context and the context supports the youth), which is operationalized in myriad ways.

As a developmental process, PYD can be represented by any instance of positive exchanges between youth and context and can be operationalized as any particular positive youth attribute that is conceptually linked with the specific context that supports its development. As an example, the Five Cs model, which is widely applied internationally in PYD scholarship, suggests that PYD is constituted by the Five Cs of character, caring, competence, connection, and confidence (Lerner et al., 2005). Research on the Five Cs model has helped to elucidate how youth programs can serve as primary ecological assets to promote the Five Cs (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Lerner et al., 2005; Zarrett & Lerner, 2008). There are, of course, many conceptions of PYD, some of which include character explicitly, such as the Five Cs model, and others which include it implicitly as an outcome or process.

PYD as a Developmental Process: Considerations for Character

The development of positive character attributes is one area of PYD scholarship.[1] Character represents the instances of mutually beneficial person ⇔ context relations that enable youth to engage morally in the social world (Lerner et al., 2022). The context, in our definition of character, then, should necessarily include the *social* world or the embeddedness of youth in a society composed of multiple other individuals. Thus, the conceptual emphasis in character development may be more narrowly focused on mutually beneficial person ⇔ person relations, in addition to the person ⇔ context relations described earlier (Lerner & Callina, 2014).

Our definition of character also specifies the way in which youth engage the social world, namely as *moral* agents (Lerner et al., 2022). An obvious challenge to discerning youth character within this definition is specifying what is meant by "moral." Conceptualizing youth as agents is intended to emphasize that youth have agency to pursue their own desires, purposes, and goals. Moral agency is about using one's agency in service to others, including other individuals, one's community, or society more broadly (Nucci, 2017). In a world characterized by globalization, "society more broadly" implies responsibility to a global community (Feixa et al., 2009). However, it also implies that what is "right" or "good" for others will necessarily depend on the norms, cultures, or needs of individuals.

Of course, distinct norms, cultures, and needs of the individual often come into conflict (Feixa et al., 2009). Thus, character means applying the appropriate attributes in the right amount, at the right times, and in the right places; a point that shifts the emphasis away from *consistency* of behavior and to *coherency* of behavior (Lerner & Callina, 2014). To be more specific, the definition of character that we provide places no inherent value on specific attributes themselves (e.g., there is nothing inherently positive or negative about "honesty") and, instead, places value on the ways in which attributes are applied in specific settings and situations. In short, focusing youth development efforts on identifying which attributes are important and those which should be fostered is essentially meaningless without treatment of when and how to apply such attributes.

Our approach to character development differs from many past conceptualizations of character, which focus on describing and promoting particular character attributes. As alternative conceptualizations involving a focus on specific attributes have been used in efforts to promote character among youth (described in more detail in later sections of this chapter), we provide an overview of some of the ways that character has been defined and studied. After the overview of

conceptualizations of character as they pertain to the PYD scholarship, we then shift into the context of youth programs and consider the ways in which character (and its various conceptualizations) is applied in the context of youth programs.

How Character Is Defined and Studied: Related Conceptualizations

There are many conceptualizations of character but, as it pertains to PYD, there are at least three specific definitions worth a brief review. We present these alternative definitions of character in a chronological sense, but not with regard to their initial introductions to the scholarly literature; instead, we review them in order of their gaining traction and approval in the literature, in hopes of explaining a general evolution of the concept of character. Later, in the sections that follow, we address the application of such conceptualizations in the specific context of youth programs.

First, virtue ethics is among the earliest approaches to the concept of character. Virtue ethics is rooted in ancient moral philosophy and, more specifically, in at least three ancient virtue frameworks that are commonly referenced today: Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (Anscombe, 1958; Broadie & Rowe, 2002; Reilly & Navaez, 2018), the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas (Pegis, 1950; Reilly & Navaez, 2018), and Confucian Virtues (Shek et al., 2013). The application of virtue ethics in psychology has informed two juxtaposed approaches. One approach stems from trait theory and has been applied extensively in personality psychology; in this approach, traits are described as general tendencies to act consistently across situations and character traits, then, are those traits which relate to character (McCrae & Costa, 1987; Reilly & Navaez, 2018). Trait theory suggests that individuals are born with predispositions toward certain virtues or vices that are static throughout the life span (Cawley et al., 2000; Noftle et al., 2011).

Another approach stemming from virtue ethics and which has been applied in positive psychology is that character virtues are viewed as malleable personal strengths. As an example, the research of Seligman and Peterson conceptualizes character virtues as individual strengths that can be developed through practice and internalized through habit formation (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues (https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/) has provided considerable scholarship on character virtues as strengths (see Arthur, this *Handbook*, Volume II, Chapter 13). A commonality across the two approaches is that each strives for a taxonomy of "universal" virtues. However, following from our conceptualization of character informed by developmental science, a taxonomy is only useful to the extent that it accounts for the application of such virtues in context, a point to which we return when we expound our conceptualization of character within the context of youth programs.

Next, character is implicitly present in the social-emotional learning (SEL) scholarship, although the term "character" is often not evoked. SEL is an area of scholarship concerned with developing in youth the capacity for optimal social and emotional functioning and which has been applied extensively in the context of schools (Durlak, 2015; Elias et al., 1997; Osher et al., 2016). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL; https://casel.org/) has been a major catalyst in SEL scholarship. SEL focuses on equipping youth, for example, with necessary skills to achieve goals, maintain healthy relationships, and make responsible choices (Durlak, 2015). Many SEL models focus on skills training as the approach to developing such capacities. For example, the CASEL framework emphasizes teaching youth self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills (Elias et al., 1997). The CASEL framework engages schools, families, and communities to teach and reinforce skills through structured activities delivered through a formal curriculum. SEL incorporates the concept of character to the extent that the focal social and emotional attributes have a moral lens.

In that vein, we argue that the attributes that are the focus in SEL qualify as character if (and only if) they instill in youth the capacity to engage the social world (via mutually beneficial person ⇔ context relations) as moral agents (Lerner et al., 2022).

Finally, a third conceptualization of character can be found in character education, in which adult leaders apply intentional programming with the goal of developing youth character. Some applications in character education differentiate types of character, such as performance character (e.g., diligence, perseverance, and self-discipline; Lickona & Davidson, 2005), civic character (e.g., civic contributions that involve the knowledge, skills, and commitments of being an active and positively engaged citizen; Seider, 2012), intellectual character (e.g., love of learning, seeking truth, and creativity; Baehr, 2013), and moral character (e.g., integrity, generosity, honesty, and concerns about human welfare, justice, and rights; Berkowitz, 2012). Although understanding the content and structure of character has certainly had a place in the character education scholarship, the focus in character education is more on process than on content.

The Center for Character and Citizenship at the University of Missouri, St. Louis (https://characterandcitizenship.org/) is among the leaders in character education scholarship (see Berkowitz & Bier, this *Handbook* Volume II, Chapter 14). In character education, the pedagogical focus is on youth reasoning, including moral reasoning (Howard et al., 2004; Leming, 1997). The impetus in character education is that youth need moral reasoning skills to be able to coherently apply the appropriate character attributes, in the appropriate setting, at the appropriate times, and in the appropriate amount. A predominant training model in character education is the PRIMED model, which focuses on: **P**rioritizing character; building positive and strong **R**elationships; fostering **I**ntrinsic motivation; **M**odeling appropriate and coherent application of character attributes; **E**mpowering youth to have moral agency; and using **D**evelopmentally appropriate methods (Berkowitz, 2021; see also Berkowitz, this *Handbook*). The character education approach often involves selecting a set of character attributes on which to focus programming. Then, the approach to developing those attributes involves fostering youth understanding of the attribute and reasoning about when and to what extent to apply it. The approach to character development in character education is aligned with our conceptualization of character to the extent that it acknowledges the importance of the application of character attributes in specific amounts, at specific times, and in specific contexts.

Considerations for How Character Is Defined and Studied

Our limited presentation of conceptualizations of character demonstrates the variety of attributes that may be understood as character, the various processes through which character is understood as being developed, and the multiple facets of scholarship on character attributes and their development. The alternative definitions of character as conceptualized within virtue ethics, SEL, and character education have all been applied in PYD scholarship to some extent. However, we believe that there are some factors that should be considered when applying these definitions to promote the development of character in youth, specifically with regard to the ways in which they deviate from the conceptualization of character which we have presented. Our conceptualization of character as a set of mutually beneficial (adaptive) person ⇔ context relations that enables individuals to engage the social world as moral agents (Lerner et al., 2022) is framed within a developmental, PYD perspective (Lerner et al., 2014). As such, it is ideally positioned to inform efforts to enhance or promote the development of character among youth, whereas there are limitations to applying the above-described alternative conceptualizations to the research and practice of PYD.

The first limitation to consider is whether the application of virtue ethics, SEL, or character education depicts a definition of development that aligns with theoretical understandings of

developmental processes. Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) metatheory defines development as person ⇔ context relations that have systematic (i.e., not random) variation, meaning that in order for something to develop, it must be able to be systematically changed or enhanced (Overton, 2013). Thus, the approach to character development taken in this chapter eschews approaches that define character as a personality trait or set of traits that are largely immutable or static. As an example, in personality psychology, many scholars are interested in studying character virtues as stable traits and use measures that were designed to assess stability (rather than change) (e.g., Schnitker & Emmons, 2007; Schnitker et al., 2017; see also Nelson et al., this *Handbook*). However, measures designed to assess stability cannot be applied to test hypotheses about the development of character, as development involves systematic change. Consistent with our conceptualization of character, the trait theorist conceptualization may be applied to examine an instance of character (e.g., the structure and content of character in a given moment), but would be insufficient to address character *development* or to apply in instances where the goal is to optimize character.

Second, because our definition of development is based on the understanding that persons are inextricable from contexts, there is no given attribute of a person that can have meaning without being considered within context. Therefore, the notion that there is a set of character attributes (or virtues or traits) that are universally agreed upon is misaligned with our conceptualization of character. Moreover, we similarly oppose the idea that character can be taught in a way that transcends context (e.g., lessons about specific attributes, such as honesty, that focus only on the attribute itself). As an example, virtue ethicists often study character as a set of virtues that are universally and indisputably important, hence the prominent literature on virtue taxonomies in, for example, personality and positive psychology (McCrae & Costa, 1987; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In fact, most approaches to character development offer at least a preliminary menu of attributes that may constitute character. We suggest that these approaches are only appropriately applied to promote the development of character in youth to the extent that they: (1) select virtues that comprise an element of morality (i.e., attributes of youth that enable moral agency) and (2) apply the virtues in a way that is specific to a given context or situation.

Third, because our RDS-based definition of development suggests that youth have agency and, moreover, that character means using that agency in service to others (Callina & Lerner, 2017), any processual application of character must account for youth capacity to reason and make personal choices. Following, then, we renounce approaches to developing character through classical conditioning. That is, although using methods of rewards and punishments that simply reinforce behaviors without reason are often used to produce instances of socially desirable behaviors (e.g., Goodman, 2006; Landrum & Kauffman, 2013), social conditioning falls short of producing moral agents capable of reasoning through a set of attributes in a particular instance and determining whether and to what extent which attributes should be applied (Goodman, 2006; Lewis, 2001). Character education, generally, and the PRIMED model more specifically, is an excellent example of an approach that deviates from classical conditioning and toward a focus on youth reasoning and situational discernment (Berkowitz, 2021).

Fourth, given the qualification of character development as involving a young person engaging morally with their social world (Lerner et al., 2022), our definition of character development must acknowledge the variation in social worlds in which young people are embedded. Although there are commonalities in the emphasis on and understanding of character across various cultural, philosophical, and religious traditions, we assert that the way in which character is defined and applied is necessarily culturally bound. As a result, dominant cultural values may be prioritized in

the identification of which attributes constitute character and how such attributes are appropriately applied to various settings. In turn, historically marginalized cultural values may be devalued and alternative conceptions of character become overlooked (Camiré et al., 2021; Clonan-Roy et al., 2016; Kochanek & Erickson, 2020). Thus, researchers like Ungar et al. (2008) express a "need for caution when research extends beyond dominant cultural groups" (p. 168), as outcomes and well-being are understood differently based on context and culture (see Spencer, this *Handbook*). The approach to character development, including the identification of which attributes to foster in young people and the instances in which they should be applied, should depend on the contexts and cultures of the specific youth within them.

In sum, we posit that an RDS-based definition of character as a specific instance of person ⇔ context relations involving moral agency (Overton, 2018) should be prioritized in the research and practice of character development, including as it is applied to youth. However, any of the conceptualizations described thus far (i.e., virtue ethics, SEL, or character education) could be applied to promote the development of character among youth if they are modified to avoid the pitfalls described earlier. An excellent tool to guide the application of any approach to character is to use the specificity principle, which suggests that development (i.e., person ⇔ context relations with systematic change) can only be understood through the lens of the specific youth, in the specific context, at the specific point in development, and within the specific historical time (Bornstein, 2017, 2019). The specificity principle is a particularly important concept in youth character development, both in terms of identifying the appropriate attributes of character that should be of focus and in determining how to best foster the skills necessary to apply the attribute in the appropriate ways and at the appropriate times (Lerner et al., 2021).

The specificity principle also supplies the reminder of developmentally appropriate applications of character. Character development cannot be imposed on youth, but rather must be fostered through a collaborative process of engaging youth and their developmental self-system (Berkowitz, 2021; Lerner et al., 2022; Nucci, 2019). Youth have greater capacity for moral agency as they progress across the life span (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977) and the attributes of character which we prioritize, as well as the methods used to teach the application of such attributes, should necessarily be aligned with their developmental capacities. Character must, therefore, be conceptualized as a developmental process. Youth programs (as described in the next section) may provide an optimal context to foster character if they utilize developmentally appropriate applications of character that align with our conceptualization of character from an RDS lens.

Youth Programs as Contexts for Development

Before examining the ways in which character development can be applied in youth programs, it is important to clarify what we mean by a youth program. Programs are structured sets of activities that are delivered by adults in planned, intentional ways to achieve some stated goal. We use the term "youth programs" in this chapter as an umbrella for a diverse set of programs that serve young people, typically in settings outside of school. We use the term "youth development (YD) program" to refer to the subset of youth programs that have an explicit emphasis on supporting the positive development of their participants, often including the development of character attributes (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

Youth programming takes a wide variety of forms, as YSOs strive to offer activities and program structures that will attract and appeal to diverse young people. YD programs seek to do more than simply provide entertainment or task-specific skill development; to be considered a YD program there must be an emphasis on supporting growth in a positive way (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

In contrast, there are also many youth programs that are not intentionally designed to support character development or PYD, including programs with goals related to education (e.g., tutoring programs), athletic achievement (e.g., programs focusing on talent development), or child-care provision (e.g., after-school or summer programs). In this chapter, when we discuss YD programs, we therefore refer to programs that explicitly seek to promote PYD, prosocial skills, or character attributes, and those which are not just programs providing amusement activities to youth. This differentiation acknowledges that not only are all youth programs not YD programs but also that not all YD programs are necessarily character development programs.

Although youth programs have some common features, the specifics of how they operate and function within local communities varies across different cultural and national contexts (including government-sponsored programs, non-profit and non-governmental organizations, fee-for-service programs, etc.; Dimitrova & Wiium, 2021). For the purposes of this chapter, it is important to note that although there are international and regional differences in available programs and approaches to working with youth, we focus here on the types of programs and approaches that have received the most attention in the English-language scholarship. The program types on which we focus therefore often reflect the United States (U.S.) cultural context and the desire of North American parents to have a variety of program options for their children. We appreciate the diversity of programming available globally and acknowledge the limitations of focusing on the English-language scholarship and the U.S. cultural context. Keeping these limitations in mind, the next section presents several dimensions on which youth programming can vary and how these factors matter for character development.

A Brief History of Youth Programs in the United States

The history of youth programs is intertwined with the history of the scholarly study of adolescent development. That is, programs were created in response to problems identified in youth and the evolution of program design aligns with the evolution of our understanding of how children and adolescents develop. The first major YSO in the U.S., to our knowledge, was the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), which was founded in the mid-1800s, in response to the problem behaviors that young boys displayed as they were drawn into cities during the industrial revolution (Morse, 1913). George Williams, the founder of the YMCA, strived for wholesome recreation that would improve the spiritual condition of young men who were engaged in such problem behaviors as substance use, gambling, and sexual promiscuity (Morse, 1913). During that same time period, the predominant view of adolescence was as a period of "storm and stress" or of turbulence (Hall, 1904). Thus, it is unsurprising that the first programs to emerge from the YMCA, and related others, were deficit-focused and aimed at reducing problem behaviors (Spencer-Wood, 1994). There was a character-focused element of the YMCA to the extent that programming focused on putting Christian values into practice to help young boys develop a healthy body, mind, and spirit.

The history of youth programs in the U.S. is also strongly rooted in classism (Witt & Caldwell, 2018). Juvenile crimes increased during and after the industrial revolution, in part, because families in poverty were forced to either send their children into cities to work for pay or, if they were too young to work, to leave them unattended while other family members worked (Nasaw, 1985). As a result, juvenile delinquency increased across the transition into and across the first several decades of the 1900s (Mennel, 1973). The federal government responded to the increase in juvenile delinquency by providing funding to keep young people off the streets; meanwhile, higher social class families pursued separate enrichment activities to keep their children segregated from the

"non-virtuous" lower class (Beiswinger, 1985). The enrichment activities of upper-class children were typically not in the form of structured programs, but rather in the form of unstructured leisure opportunities pursued within the family (e.g., reading, music, and art, practiced at home). Thus, youth programs became prevention-focused for youth in poverty (Nasaw, 1985) and later would be designed as enrichment opportunities for all youth (Catalano et al., 2008). The general design of programs remained deficit-focused throughout much of the 20th century, although these prevention programs increasingly incorporated behavioral science approaches (Catalano et al., 2008).

As research on human development progressed into the middle and late 1900s, the view of adolescents as "problems to be fixed" was challenged. That is, empirical evidence suggested that the problems that were the focus of adolescent research were more normative than not and, moreover, most youth went on to be healthy functioning adults, despite the rise in problem behaviors during adolescence (Arnett, 1999). Around the 1980s, then, the view of adolescence changed to one of "strengths to be developed" and this shift affected the design of youth programs (Lerner et al., 2015; Pittman et al., 2001). Instead of intervention designs that targeted single problem behaviors, programs widened in scope to focus either on the prevention of multiple problem behaviors or on the promotion of multiple strengths. In either the prevention or promotion instance of programs, the predominant theoretical approach in programs was to develop youth strengths (Benson, 2002). In the scholarly literature, this theoretical approach became known as "positive youth development" and would from that point become the dominant view in youth development scholarship (Catalano et al., 2008).

The strengths-based theory underpinning PYD became the basis of youth programming through the 1980s and 1990s and gained particular traction across the turn of the century (Maton et al., 2004). The PYD approach led programs to focus on promoting positive assets and to adopt PYD models as their theoretical approach to program design. For example, earlier in this chapter, we referred to the Five Cs model of PYD, which focuses on developing the Five Cs of character, caring, competence, connection, and confidence which, in turn, lead to an increase in contribution (e.g., to one's community) and a decrease in problem behaviors (Lerner et al., 2005). Another dominant strengths-based approach in youth development in this era was the developmental assets model, which categorized assets as either internal (i.e., strengths of the individual) or external (i.e., resources in the context) and focused on aligning internal and external assets to promote youth thriving (Benson, 2006). Notably, in each of these PYD models, which dominated research and practice in youth development, character was present either as an indicator of thriving (i.e., as in the Five Cs model) or as an individual strength (i.e., as in the developmental assets model). As the evidence base for programs as contexts to promote PYD and character grew, youth programming in the U.S. evolved toward a goal of providing a variety of different program types and designs that would appeal to diverse youth interests.

Considering Various Aspects of Youth Programs

YD programs are delivered in a wide variety of settings, including through schools and communities. School-based programs are often referred to as extracurricular activities (ECAs) and limited funding is provided through federal and state education budgets to sustain them. Such publicly funded programs may be fairly affordable and accessible to youth; many school-based ECAs are free to the extent that there is no monetary fee to join, with the exception of sports, which nearly always requires a fee (Project Play, 2021). However, school-based programs often face barriers to having an explicit character focus because whether character is an appropriate use of public funds or whether schools are appropriate authorities to make decisions about character is widely debated

(Howard et al., 2004). Instead, many school-based ECAs are focused on developing a skill or competency that likely would not be considered character, such as the mathematics club or Spanish club, which emphasize mathematics and language/cultural skills, respectively. Nevertheless, some school-based ECAs, such as student council, may be focused on attributes, such as leadership, that if applied in a way that exemplifies moral agency, could constitute character. Thus, although they are often the most accessible types of youth programs, most school-based ECAs do not have an explicit character lens.

Community-based programs are typically delivered through a YSO that is nested within a local community. Community-based programs utilize a variety of funding models, including not-for-profit, profit-based, and government-sponsored programs. Community-based programs are often mission-oriented and many have an explicit focus on character development. For example, programs such as Girl Scouts refer to character development in their mission statements in terms of increasing skills and values that guide girls' actions and provide a foundation for decision-making. The program indicates that girls will make the world a better place through development of courage, confidence, and character (www.girlscouts.org). Similarly, Boy Scouts of America attempts to help youth to make ethical and moral choices over their life (https://www.scouting.org/).

Importantly, there remain substantial barriers to accessing community-based programs relative to programs offered through schools. Examples of potential barriers to accessing community-based programs include fees to join, transportation to and from a facility that is not an ordinary context for youth (unlike schools, where youth attend daily), and lack of knowledge about a program's existence (e.g., D'Agostino & Visser, 2010; Perkins et al., 2007). Thus, one dilemma with regard to character development through participation in youth programs may be that school-based programs are relatively more accessible than community-based programs but relatively less focused on character development.

Programs serving youth also vary in terms of who they serve, with some providing services only to youth and others incorporating families, schools, or communities as well. Family-oriented programs focus on supporting youth development by modifying parenting styles, enhancing parent-child relationships, or improving the family environment, whereas school-oriented programs focus on improving the lives of individual students (e.g., enhancing achievement motivation), classrooms (e.g., increasing organization and routine within the class), or schools (e.g., creating a sense of cohesion within the student body) (Durlak et al., 2007). Community-based programs rely on prosocial components such as reciprocity, social responsibility, altruism, and volunteerism (Siu et al., 2012) and provide norms, goals, expectations, and opportunities for bonding with peers and adults (García-Poole et al., 2019). Character can be a focus of any program delivered at these various levels of the youth ecologies.

Youth programs are often categorized by their programming content or the focus of the activities in which participating youth engage. Common activity types include leadership (e.g., 4-H), mentoring (e.g., Big Brothers Big Sisters), sports (team sports, such as basketball, and individual sports, such as martial arts), performing arts (theater, dance, music, etc.), visual arts (painting, ceramics, photography, etc.), government or civic (e.g., student council), academic clubs (e.g., honor society and STEM clubs), and faith-based (e.g., religious youth groups), among others. The various types of activities available to youth are important to consider in relation to character development for multiple reasons. Various types of activities are necessary to appeal to the diverse interests of youth and to motivate youth to join and stay in programs (Gardner & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). The different types of activities are also associated with different developmental experiences for youth (Hansen et al., 2010; Larson et al., 2006) and, thus, may achieve different developmental goals.

Character can be promoted through any of these types of activities, if character development is an explicit goal and specific strategies are implemented to promote it.

General Approaches to Programming

There are two general philosophical approaches to youth programming, namely prevention and promotion (Catalano et al., 2002). Prevention approaches focus on reducing problem behavior(s), often through the development of youth strengths. As it relates to character development, a prevention approach might focus on developing character attributes but as a means of reducing problem behaviors. For example, through Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, youth are paired with mentors who help them develop self-confidence which, in turn, is expected to reduce negative behaviors, such as truancy, substance use, and interpersonal violence (https://www.bbbs.org/about-us). A promotion approach focuses on the explicit goal of developing youth strength(s). Again, as it relates to character development, a promotion approach might include the explicit goal of developing a specific strength that might qualify as a character attribute, that is, if it is applied in a specific context in a way that enables the youth to engage the world as a moral agent (following our definition of character). As an example, the Positive Coaching Alliance is a national non-profit that provides youth programming aimed at enhancing specific attributes, such as growth mindset, resilience, and empathy that, when applied and practiced in sport, can enable youth to become better athletes and better people (www.positivecoach.org). Both prevention and promotion approaches to programming can provide important opportunities for character development.

Of course, all programs are not created equal in terms of their potential to promote PYD or character. Indeed, the quality of programming is an essential factor that determines the extent to which programs can achieve their developmental goals. One prominent and influential model for assessing the quality of YD programs was developed by Eccles and Gootman (2002) in a report to the National Academies of Sciences (NAS), which provided a set of eight research-based features that differentiated programs in terms of universal quality (e.g., positive social norms, supportive relationships, and opportunities to belong). However, an important limitation of the evidence base available at the time of the NAS report was that samples were largely White, middle class youth. The lack of diversity of youth samples from which the universal program quality principles were drawn limits generalizability to diverse youth populations (Simpkins et al., 2017; Spencer & Spencer, 2014). The limitation of generalizability of the Eccles and Gootman framework is important, especially when character is a focal process and outcome in programming, because character is instantiated in ways that reflect the relations between individuals and their unique contexts (as compared to universal sets of features or attributes).

Character necessarily has cultural and contextual connotations that should be considered, and that matter for discerning program quality. Program quality should also be assessed in terms of its responsiveness to youth ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Culturally responsive programming takes into account the cultural practices, beliefs, values, and knowledge of the target participants (Gay, 2018). For example, Simpkins and colleagues (2017) adapted the Eccles and Gootman (2002) framework to consider various ways in which program structure (i.e., features of the context) could be adapted to be culturally responsive to the youth being served. Similarly, the local cultural context and backgrounds of the specific youth participating in a program should be considered in identifying and defining attributes as character. In other words, youth cultural backgrounds and the cultural contexts in which they live should be a primary factor in defining what constitutes moral action, how features of a context should be adapted to be morally aligned with the local culture, and what processes should be used within a context to foster character development.

The specificity principle (Bornstein, 2019) can be applied in programmatic decisions to be culturally responsive: programs should foster specific character attributes that are important and valued in the local culture, use practices that are culturally relevant, and adapt program features to be sensitive to the moral principles grounding the local cultural community. For example, what constitutes a positive social norm will necessarily vary across cultural contexts. In some cultures, collectivism is a dominant moral principle, such that the appropriate ways of acting are in cooperation with the group and for the collective good (Triandis, 1993). In other cultures, such as the culture of White, upper-middle class America, individualism is a dominant moral principle and acting selfishly for the sake of upward mobility might be deemed appropriate or "right." In short, programs should be as unique as youth. There is no single program, including a type of activity or context for delivery, that will foster character development for all youth; and there is no youth who will be well served by all programs. Programs should be specific to the specific youth served and representative of the specific local cultural context within which they are nested.

Linking Character Attributes with Program Participation

Programmatic theories of change (TOCs) are models developed to represent the specific processes through which the activities delivered in programs are expected to cause specific outcomes (see Urban et al., this *Handbook*). In other words, TOCs serve as a basis of logic models connecting the activities in a program to their intended outcomes (Funnell & Rogers, 2011). Importantly, there are no rules indicating which activities within programs are or should be linked with which outcomes, except *logic*. The research to date on youth programs has largely linked participation in YD programs, in general or as participation in categories or types of programs (e.g., arts, sports, and clubs), with developmental outcomes or sets of outcomes (e.g., Larson et al., 2006; Zarrett et al., 2009). Thus, TOCs represent the process of how programs "work" more specifically than the process has been represented or tested in the empirical research on youth programs to date.

Knowledge of how participation in different types of activities works to promote which types of outcomes is limited and is often referred to as the "black box" in the youth program literature (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003) for at least two reasons. First, there are few studies that include data on the specific activities that comprise a program; participation is often conceptualized as some quantity of participation (e.g., frequency/intensity and duration) in some type of program (e.g., arts or sports) or several types of programs (e.g., arts and sports), which is referred to as breadth (e.g., Agans et al., 2017; Mahoney & Vest, 2012; Zarrett et al., 2009). Second, few research studies use rigorous methods that allow for conclusions about causation (e.g., experiments or quasi-experiments) and, instead, much of the research on youth programs is correlational (Naftzger, 2014). There is certainly enough evidence to suggest that participation in programs, in general, is related to character development, which has been conceptualized in a variety of ways (e.g., Zarrett et al., 2021); however, which types of programs (or activities) best promote which character attributes in which contexts is uncertain.

Thus, we posit that researchers and practitioners interested in fostering character development through youth programs should remain open to the potential of many types of programs to promote many different character attributes and that whether and how programs promote character is an empirical question that warrants further investigation. In the next two sections, we demonstrate the diversity of programming available to promote many different character attributes. First, we focus on the missions of different programs to demonstrate how programs that might be categorized similarly in the scholarly literature (e.g., as leadership or as faith-based programs) can have character-focused missions that emphasize a wide range of character attributes. Then, we review the

empirical evidence that exists to suggest which types of programs might be effective to promote various attributes that might constitute character. Of note, a full review of all the various types of programs and activities and their associations with character (and the myriad operationalizations of it) is beyond the scope of this chapter. Thus, our intention is to provide examples of programs and various attributes that might constitute character to demonstrate the diversity of programming and character-related outcomes and to highlight the need for research on character development in YD programs that accounts for program-level diversity.

Mission-Oriented Programming Related to Character Development

Many youth programs are delivered through YSOs with explicit missions and goals. When programs function under an explicit mission, the programmatic TOC often includes specific activities that are designed to foster the specific youth outcomes stated in the mission. TOCs are helpful for YSOs to explain their programs and programming approaches within and beyond the organization. TOCs are also helpful as a guide to collecting data to test whether a program is effective and whether a program works the way it was designed to work. When the mission of a YD program is related to character, the TOC must therefore articulate both what aspects of character the program is intended to foster as well as what aspects of the program are intended to support character development.

There are many different youth programs that function under explicit missions related to character. Importantly, there is variation across types of programs in terms of which character attributes they aim to develop and, further, whether they conceptualize such attributes as character. There is also variation within program types (e.g., within arts-based programs) in terms of the character attributes they aim to foster and in the terms used to represent the outcomes of interest to the organization. Table 26.1 provides several examples of YSOs and their various programs that have some focus on character development or that include character attributes as intended outcomes of the program. Throughout our examples of programs, we are cautious to use the terminology that the organization uses as part of their mission instead of applying our labels or determinations about whether the attributes constitute character. Nevertheless, the organizations and programs we have chosen as representative in this section are character-focused in some way, whether by their own determination or by alignment with our definition of character presented in this chapter.

As shown in Table 26.1, there are many examples of different types of programs available to youth to promote character. A first distinction might be made between prevention and promotion programs. The table provides several examples of prevention programs that include character attributes as youth strengths that enable capacities to prevent problem behaviors. Among the range of risk behaviors are substance use, risky sexual activity, violence, school truancy or dropout, and poor physical health outcomes. There are, of course, many other prevention programs available to youth that focus on other risk behaviors not mentioned here. The primary premise of the prevention programs included in the table is that they include activities designed to promote youth strengths which, in turn, help to reduce problem behaviors. For example, the Life Skills Training program and the Bicultural Competence Skills program each teach youth skills, such as social competence and self-control, that help to avoid substance use. The types of prevention programs provided as examples in the table support character development through a process that aligns with our definition of character, such that they promote the development of attributes (e.g., self-control) that, when applied in specific contexts (e.g., instances when confronting peer pressure to use substances), enhance the youth (e.g., reduce substance use), the other individuals with whom the youth interacts (e.g., modeling resistance to substance use), and the contexts within which the

Table 26.1 Examples of youth development programs with character development goals

Program	*Goal(s) of the program*	*Activity type(s)*	*Website/Reference*
4-H	This program began as an agricultural career development program, however, over time it evolved into an expansive PYD organization that promotes the Five Cs of PYD and youth contributions to society.	Various	https://4-h.org/
21st Century Community Learning Centers	Providing academic enrichment opportunities for youth, particularly those who are experiencing poverty and attending low-performing schools.	Academic	https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-formula-grants/school-support-and-accountability/21st-century-community-learning-centers/
America Scores	Provides a setting where students can participate in sport activities, express themselves and inspire positive change off the field and outside the classroom to develop creativity, racial equity, leadership, commitment, teamwork, and fair play.	Sport; arts	https://www.americascoresnewyork.org/
Bicultural Competence Skills	Preventing substance abuse by promoting prosocial, coping, problem-solving, decision-making, communication, and social network-building skills.	Leadership; educational	https://crimesolutions.ojp.gov/ratedprograms/262
Big Brothers Big Sisters	Promoting prosocial skills (e.g., reciprocity, social responsibility, altruism, and volunteerism) and helping youth achieve success in school and avoid risky behaviors.	Mentoring	https://www.bbbs.org/
Boys and Girls Clubs of America	Developing physical fitness, reducing stress, and promoting positive use of leisure time, and leadership skills.	Sport; recreation	https://bgca.org/
Boys Scouts of America	This program fosters character development and value-based leadership skills with the mission of preparing boys and girls to make ethical and moral choices over their life.	Recreation	https://www.scouting.org/
Children of Divorce Intervention Program	Preventing maladjustment from family structure changes by promoting resilience and healthy coping.	Life skills; educational	https://www.childrensinstitute.net/programs-and-services/codip

(Continued)

Table 26.1 (Continued)

Program	*Goal(s) of the program*	*Activity type(s)*	*Website/Reference*
Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR)	Preventing adolescent pregnancy, homelessness, and domestic violence by promoting life skills.	Life skills; educational	https://www.nifa.usda.gov/grants/programs/4-h-positive-youth-development/4-h-access-equity-opportunity/children-youth-families-risk-cyfar
Community Impact	Promoting educational skills to enrich academic outcomes, address problems faced by students in low-income neighborhoods, and engage families in youth learning.	Academic	
Congressional Award Program	This program prioritizes volunteer public service, personal development, physical fitness, and exploration. Democracy is the primary political value that is emphasized.	Civic	https://www.congressionalaward.org/
Creative Action's Artists in Action program	Youth develop life skills such as creativity, compassion, critical thinking, and collaboration thought arts which leads to their academic achievement, civic participation, and more success in the workplace.	Arts	creativeaction.org
First Tee Golf	This youth development program accompanies golf instruction with a curriculum designed to build the character strengths of honesty, integrity, perseverance, and respect. The program also aspires to develop "inner strength, self-confidence, and resilience" in youth as they learn and improve their golf game.	Sport	https://firsttee.org/programs/
Future Farmers of America (FFA)	This program supports youth developing agricultural careers. It also has expanded to teacher, research, and development careers in the agriculture and livestock industry.	Leadership	https://www.ffa.org/
Girl Scouts of the USA	Providing opportunities for youth to learn new skills, lead, make an impact on their community, have adventurous experiences, make friends, and have fun. Girls build courage, confidence, and character in the program.	Recreation	https://www.girlscouts.org/

(Continued)

Table 26.1 (Continued)

Program	*Goal(s) of the program*	*Activity type(s)*	*Website/Reference*
Life Skills Training	Preventing school dropout, substance use, and violence by promoting strengths, such as school belonging and peer bonding.	Life skills; educational	https://www.blueprintsprograms.org/lifeskills-training-lst/
Military Child Education Coalition's Student 3 Student program	Supporting military-connected children in education challenges they face due to the military lifestyle, as well as their social and emotional needs. Parents and other adults are empowered to help children be ready for college, workforce, and life.	Mentoring	https://www.militarychild.org/programs/student-2-student
Midwestern Prevention Project	Preventing substance use by promoting drug and alcohol resistance skills.	Leadership; arts; educational	https://crimesolutions.ojp.gov/ratedprograms/247
Mirror Image Arts's "Your Voice" program	This program promotes positive youth development in youth in schools and juvenile detention centers by utilizing interactive theatre. The program provides spaces for youth to express themselves, feel valued, seen, and heard.	Arts	https://www.mirrorimagearts.org/programs
Muslim Center of New York Youth Program	Promoting Muslim identity, critical thinking, social awareness, and activism.	Faith-based	https://muslimcenter.org/
Navy CYP	Fostering self-esteem, appropriate relationships, and healthy decision making, along with facilitating academic success.	Sport; recreation	https://www.navycyp.org/
Norris Square Neighborhood Project	This program provides youth opportunities to explore culture and social-justice issues, developed their leadership skills, make peer relationships by creating visual art, and learning about urban agriculture.	Arts; leadership	https://myneighborhoodproject.org/
Positive Coaching Alliance's Character and Leadership Development Program	Fostering skills that youth need in athletic competitions, classrooms, communities, and future careers by interactive sessions that integrate group learning and case study techniques.	Sport	https://positivecoach.org/media/839777/pca_character_leadership_wkshp.pdf

(Continued)

Table 26.1 (Continued)

Program	*Goal(s) of the program*	*Activity type(s)*	*Website/Reference*
Promise Neighborhoods	Promoting student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.	Academic	https://www2.ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods/index.html
Salvation Army	The program operationalizes character development as developing positive relationships, community service, self-care, and adherence to Christian principles.	Faith-based	https://caringmagazine.org/
Theater Reaching Young People and Schools (TRYPS)	Children develop the qualities of hope, courage, creativity, honesty, and tolerance through theatre.	Arts	http://www.trypskids.com
Young Judea	This program focuses on promoting Jewish values, community service, and love of Israel.	Faith-based	https://www.youngjudaea.org/
Young Men's Christian Associations' Youth and Government program	This program helps youth to learn to debate issues "that affect citizens in their state," and propose legislation and give them an opportunity to participate in the debate over legislation on the floor of their state legislature.	Civic; leadership	https://www.ymca.org/
Youthbuild	Helping youth earn High School Equivalency diplomas, workforce credential(s), and placement in a career pathway or higher education.	Mentoring	https://youthbuild.org/
YOUth Voice for Social Justice	This program trains youth serving organizations to promote youth-led critical reflection in order to identify and address social justice issues in their communities.	Civic	https://cfsem.org/initiative/youth-social-justice/

Notes: Programs presented in alphabetical order.

youth applies such attributes (e.g., creating a norm against substance use). Indeed, character development as a process and character attributes as focal skills are included in many types of youth prevention programs.

Next, there are also many promotion programs that include character as part of their mission to promote youth strengths. Table 26.1 highlights various YSOs with specific programs that have some focus on character development. For example, 4-H is among the largest YSOs in the U.S., and is delivered by Cooperative Extension, the nationwide education system that operates through land-grant universities in partnership with the government to meet the needs of the communities within which they are nested (www.4-h.org). The 4-H mission is to give all young people access to opportunity and one way that they achieve their mission is through the provision of youth programs focused on character development. 4-H offers a variety of different types of programs to support character development, including STEM, agricultural, sport-based, leadership, and civic, among others. Other YSOs that are similarly structured to provide many different types of youth programs, and which include character in their missions, include the Boys & Girls Clubs of America (www.bgca.org), the Y (www.ymca.org), Girl Scouts (www.girlscouts.org), Boy Scouts of America (www.scouting.org), and Girls Inc. (www.girlsinc.org), among others.

There are, of course, many different YSOs and programs that represent a singular type of programming, such as arts, sports, or civic, and that include a focus on character. In Table 26.1, we have provided examples of several different types of programs, including mentoring, academic enrichment, sport and recreation, faith-based, leadership, arts, and civic programs. Each of these programs focuses on a singular type of activity as a way to teach youth character attributes or as a way to foster a process of character development. For example, arts programs use activities, such as performance arts (e.g., theater) and visual arts (e.g., sculpture) to promote youth strengths, such as creativity, compassion, and self-empowerment. Sport programs use competitive, physical activities to promote youth strengths, such as self-confidence, coping skills, and teamwork. Notably, a variety of program examples are included in Table 26.1 to demonstrate that different types of programs, such as sport or arts, can promote the same youth attributes, such as the variety of self attributes that may reflect character (e.g., self-esteem, self-worth, self-empowerment, and self-confidence). Moreover, programs within the same category, such as an arts program in which youth engage in theater and an arts program in which youth create sculptures, can promote different youth attributes.

Thus, two themes are evident in the table of example programs – that different program types can promote the same character attributes and that the same program types can promote different character attributes. The key is for youth programs to be deliberately designed to deliver specific kinds of activities that are intended to promote specific attributes and help youth learn to apply these attributes in ways that demonstrate character. A diversity of programming is necessary to address the interests of youth and, in turn, to recruit and retain youth in programs. Diversity in programming is also necessary to help youth develop the ability to navigate and negotiate different attributes that constitute character and to practice their application across varied developmental contexts.

Evidence for YD Programs' Capacities to Promote Character

As demonstrated in the preceding section and in Table 26.1, there are many YSOs and programs which aim to promote character development. However, whether programs are effective to meet their character development goals is less clear. Discerning evidence for YD programs' capacities to promote youth character is difficult for a few reasons. First, it is difficult to assess the effects

of a youth program when the voluntary nature of participation means that random assignment of youth to participate creates challenges to validity, and when participants may differ from non-participants in numerous ways (Lerner et al., 2014). Lerner and colleagues (2014) have identified methodological tools that can help researchers assess the effects of youth program participation, such as propensity score analysis, but these tools have yet to be widely adopted by researchers and evaluators designing studies to demonstrate effectiveness of a program (or programs) to promote youth character. The evidence in the scholarly literature for YD programs' capacities to promote character is therefore limited, in part, because the methods used have limitations to draw such conclusions.

Next, discerning evidence for character is also challenging to the extent that measuring character is challenging. A primary challenge to measuring character is the lack of consensus around what constitutes character, either as an attribute or as a process. Of course, as we have articulated in our definition of character, we do not advocate for shared agreement about a set of standardized attributes that constitute character. Instead, we have argued that character is defined as the specific set of mutually beneficial person ⇔ context (and person ⇔ person) relations that enable moral action and, thus, a multitude of attributes could constitute character when exhibited in appropriate contexts. Nevertheless, scholars interested in taxonomies of character attributes have attempted to consolidate attributes that might constitute character into particular groups or families. For example, Zarrett et al. (2021) reviewed empirical research between 1999 and 2019 and found that attributes constituting moral components of character were operationalized as behaviors (e.g., kindness, helpfulness, respect, empathy, and trustworthiness) or cognitions (e.g., understanding and reasoning), among others. From our perspective, the lack of consensus around which attributes constitute character is not a problem, per se, so long as conceptualizations of character attributes derive from well-defined theories and, in turn, inform respective operationalizations (e.g., Lerner et al., 2014). The lack of consensus on defining character does, however, cause limitations to the general conclusions we might draw about character as it relates to youth programs.

Despite the largely methodological limitations to drawing conclusions about YD programs' capacities to promote character, there are some general trends that serve as empirical evidence. As a starting point and to (re-)assert its salience, character is the second most frequently cited goal of YD programs (Mercier et al., 2019; Park, 2004). Moreover, there is strong empirical evidence for character in PYD models, such as the Five Cs model. That is, the evidence for the Five Cs model suggests that participation in youth programs is a strong predictor of PYD, which is constituted by the Five Cs of caring, competence, confidence, character, and connection (e.g., Zarrett et al., 2009); among the Five Cs, character has been the strongest predictor of the sixth C of contribution to one's community (e.g., Conway et al., 2015). Therefore, there is evidence that character is both a direct and indirect outcome of participation in youth programs.

Indeed, there is considerable evidence of the positive impact of participating in youth programs on character attributes (Lerner et al., 2021). A consistent finding is that participation in YD programs of any type is related to increased character, defined in a variety of ways and as a multitude of attributes, compared to non-participation (e.g., Zarrett et al., 2009). When program participation is quantified more specifically to capture variation in dosage, such as by intensity or duration of participation, the relations with character attributes are mixed. For example, one study found that intensity of participation in Boy Scouts of America programs was not associated with kindness (Champine et al., 2016), whereas another study found duration of participation in Boy Scouts of America programs was associated with increased helpfulness (Lynch et al., 2016). Although it is important to note that different operationalizations of both program participation and character were used in the two Boy Scouts of America studies, nonetheless, the general patterns

of associations between the program and attributes of character were inconsistent. As another example, some studies show consistent findings, despite slight variations in operationalizations of programs and character: Walker et al. (2017) found that participation in charity, art, and sport programs was positively associated with moral judgment, which was consistent with the findings of Larson et al. (2020) who reported that youth programs promoted moral agency, ethical judgments, and actions. Thus, a general conclusion can be drawn that the evidence is sufficient to suggest that youth programs promote character (Zarrett et al., 2021); however, the nuances related to which types of programs promote which character attributes warrant further scrutiny.

A final point worth noting is that we have thus far only addressed one side of the bidirectional arrow constituting character as we have defined it in this chapter – that is, the role of youth programs to promote youth character (i.e., context => person). Character, as we have defined it here, involves exchanges between youth and context and, thus, also involves youth impacts on the context (i.e., person => context). The examples we have provided throughout emphasize the role of programs in developing youth character, such that youth develop the capacity to discern complex situations through participation in various activities delivered in programs. The various examples we have provided of attributes which may constitute character elucidate the diverse ways in which character is manifested in distinct contexts. A fundamental commonality among the various attributes provided as examples throughout this chapter is that of contribution to self, family, community, or society (e.g., Lerner et al., 2005). Thus, an important conclusion, in our view, is that character development should not be a focus of youth programs solely for the sake of developing the attributes for youth themselves, but rather for the sake of enabling youth to engage positively with society. We further posit that purposes for engaging in society be unified around social justice and democracy because, if character involves acting with moral agency and in pursuit of the well-being of others (Nucci, 2017), then character development in youth programming is only relevant to the extent that youth develop the capacity to contribute to social justice (Lerner et al., 2010; Smith & Smith Lee, 2020). This approach is foundational to the concept of PYD itself within the Five Cs approach, which posits the sixth C of contribution to community as an important result of the development of the Five Cs of PYD (Lerner et al., 2005). As such, all programs that promote PYD could be understood as supporting the development of character to the extent that they foster mutually beneficial person ⇔ context relations that enable youth to engage morally in the social world (Lerner et al., 2022).

Challenges of Character Development Work

As noted in the prior sections of this chapter, many YSOs either explicitly or implicitly seek to promote character development. We have highlighted several of the ways in which character is operationalized in these programs and have described the research evidence for their efficacy. However, there are also many challenges to this work, in terms of both program design and evaluation.

Challenges to Program Design

As previously noted, youth programs are designed on philosophies and TOCs that explain how programs approach young people and their development and which affect how youth are situated within the program (Funnell & Rogers, 2011). On the one hand, programs designed through use of a deficit model view youth (or specific categories of youth, whom programs are designed to serve) as problems for the program to solve (Pittman et al., 2001) and view the program as rehabilitating poor character. In the deficit-reduction approach, programming is often viewed as being imposed

on youth rather than as a collaboration with youth. On the other hand, programs that view youth as having agency in their own development may design programs in which youth strengths are central (e.g., Maletsky & Evans, 2017). YSOs vary in the extent to which they are successful in implementing programming that effectively aligns with deficit-reduction versus strengths promotion philosophies. For example, although many programs recognize that encouraging and supporting youth to engage in program development and decision-making can contribute to PYD (e.g., Iwasaki, 2015), collaborating and sharing power with youth can also be difficult (e.g., Burke et al., 2017; Maletsky & Evans, 2017). We believe that character development programming can only be effective when designed to make youth voice central and to empower youth to be a part of the program design and implementation (Dawes & Larson, 2011).

Another issue faced by youth programs, especially those seeking to promote character development among youth, is the need to acknowledge cultural differences in the attributes of youth or aspects of character that are valued (Camiré et al., 2021; Kochanek & Erickson, 2020). As previously noted, programs working with diverse populations should be especially thoughtful in developing programming that is accommodating or adaptable to youth of different backgrounds. However, this process is difficult for programs not originally designed to serve youth from different cultural groups, and often requires change in organizational culture (e.g., Larson & Ngo, 2017; Outley & Witt, 2006; Rich & Giles, 2014). In addition, when considering that character is a developmental regulation that includes the social context, some programs may also need to consider how to support assimilation or acculturation processes (e.g., for immigrant youth; Larson & Ngo, 2017). Following Bornstein's (2017, 2019) specificity principle, the development of any particular character attribute will rely on how the specific features of the program context interrelate with the specific youth being served at that specific point in their lives (Lerner et al., 2021).

Similarly, attempts to promote youth attributes, such as resilience and grit, without acknowledging the inequities that lead some youth to need these strengths more than others have been criticized as contributing to systemic injustices (Camiré et al., 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Kochanek & Erickson, 2020). We have articulated a definition of character as more than just a characteristic of the individual, that is, as involving social contexts. However, as the social world can, in fact, undermine positive development through oppressive structures and systems (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Ortega-Williams & Harden, 2022), the development of character may also require awareness of when individuals should not conform to social expectations. This idea of non-conformity is grounded in Paulo Freire's (1984) concept of critical consciousness, which "describes how oppressed or marginalized people learn to critically analyze their social conditions and act to change them" (Watts et al., 2011, p. 44). Whereas some YD programs are designed to help youth build critical consciousness (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Ortega-Williams & Harden, 2022), the wide variety of definitions of character across the youth service industry mean that not all programs seeking to promote character development follow this approach. In fact, it is certainly possible that one program's character-promoting activities may contradict another program's character-oriented mission.

Finally, no program can promote the development of character (or indeed, any other attribute) among youth who do not engage with the program (e.g., Akiva et al., 2013; Bartko, 2005). Gillard and Witt (2008); Lauver and Little (2005) had identified several key strategies for participant recruitment and retention, but most are focused on increasing participant motivation rather than overcoming obstacles to participation and engagement. Programs designed to serve youth from under-resourced or marginalized communities may need to pursue additional strategies such as reducing barriers to access based on factors such as program cost, transportation, etc. (Borden et al., 2006; Pelcher & Rajan, 2016) and ensuring that the program has culturally responsive approaches to staff training and rules for participants (Sjogren & Melton, 2021). Regardless of the

population being served, youth development is a process driven by the agency of the young person (e.g., Lerner et al., 2021) and character development in youth programs therefore requires their active participation and investment.

Challenges to Program Evaluation

Once a program has been designed and implemented, program evaluation can be used to determine whether it is being implemented as designed (process evaluation) and/or whether it has its intended impact on participants (outcome evaluation) (Ellard & Parsons, 2010). Many programs do not engage in rigorous evaluation (Agans et al., 2020; Arnold & Cater, 2011) and instead rely on anecdotes and instincts with regard to their program's effectiveness. Programs that do conduct evaluations grapple with a range of challenges, including scarce resources and distrust of evaluators, and the panoply of challenges to program evaluation itself, including questions about appropriate program dosage and difficulty collecting and analyzing data (Chaudhary et al., 2020; Ellard & Parsons, 2010; Ettekal et al., 2017; Izzo et al., 2004).

In addition to these general challenges of program evaluation, a major challenge when evaluating youth character programs is the definition and operationalization of character itself, as the definition of character used by the program must be consistent and align with the measurement tools used. We have noted previously that there are vast differences across programs in how character is defined; these inconsistencies can pose challenges when it comes to evaluation because the measures used to capture "character development" must align with the operationalization of character used in the specific program being evaluated. The proliferation of definitions of character has led to a proliferation of measures to assess character (Zamarro et al., 2016), and yet programs may still be unable to find appropriate validated measures for their particular understanding of character, leading evaluators to continually develop new measures (e.g., Agans et al., 2018).

In this chapter, we have suggested that Lerner and Callina's (2014) definition of character as mutually beneficial person ⇔ context and person ⇔ person relations could be used as an overarching framework for understanding character development in youth programs. When engaging in program evaluation, adopting this framework would require programs to move away from an emphasis on measuring specific character attributes (e.g., honesty) as traits of the individual and instead assess the extent to which the program is both supporting youth in their development of character attributes and the extent to which participating youth apply these attributes within and beyond the program. This approach could also support a more holistic understanding of character development that recognizes youth programs as only one of the many contexts in which character development occurs (Lerner et al., 2010), preventing program evaluations from focusing on one aspect of character even when it may be at odds with other aspects of character in other contexts (e.g., choosing between studying and taking care of siblings). Although Lerner and Callina's (2014) definition is more complex than approaches based on taxonomies of universal character attributes, it allows evaluations to capture character development across contexts.

Conclusions

It is widely recognized that youth programs have the capacity to promote character development – in fact, what distinguishes YD programs from other types of fun experiences for youth is that they are intended to support youth toward positive development, often including the development of character. However, the lack of clarity and considerable inconsistencies in how youth programs

operationalize or evaluate character development make it difficult to assess how effective they are in reality. Because this conceptual confusion precludes empirical knowledge of program effectiveness, we suggest that the field must first begin to untangle these issues.

One way to do so is to reframe current approaches as different expressions of Lerner and Callina's (2014) definition of character as a relational process. With the shared understanding of character as both an individual attribute and an effort toward social justice, as compared to a trait located within the individual, it is less divisive for different programs to focus on different aspects of this process – they could utilize common evaluation systems and contribute to shared knowledge of effective programming methods. Such a unified effort to understand character development in youth programs is important to advance research and practice, and so that youth can be supported in learning to apply the appropriate character attributes in the right amount, at the right times, and in the right places.

Note

1 We acknowledge that character development scholarship is not siloed within the scholarship on positive youth development. However, because our theoretical basis is in optimizing human development, we position our definition of character within the positive youth development framing, which we suggest is most pertinent to youth programs.

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PHILANTHROPIC APPROACHES TO CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

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Philanthropic investments in character development have increased dramatically over the past 40 years, largely driven by increased interest from private foundations and individual donors. These investments vary in focus, scope, and approach across funding organizations, but all are aimed at improving the lives of individuals and communities. This chapter focuses primarily, although not exclusively, on the private philanthropic context, highlighting approaches and specific initiatives from leading family foundations, including the authors' home institution, the John Templeton Foundation (JTF).

To better understand the broader context surrounding current philanthropic approaches to character development, the chapter begins with an overview of how character is defined and a brief history of early character initiatives in the United States. Following a more detailed discussion of current philanthropic approaches, the chapter then closes by outlining the challenges and opportunities that private philanthropies face as we look toward the next generation of grantmaking in character development.

Defining Character

The most important place to start when considering philanthropic approaches to character development is the definition and framing of the construct itself. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham defines *character* as "a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation, and guide conduct" (2022, p. 7). *Character development* is the changes in these traits or dispositions over time. *Character education*, as defined by the team at the Jubilee Centre, "includes all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people to develop positive personal strengths called virtues" (2022, p. 7). Within this virtue framing, aspects of a person's character can be further categorized as moral character, intellectual character, performance character, and civic character. Moral character includes individual qualities or virtues that foster good relationships (e.g., generosity, forgiveness), intellectual character includes individual qualities or virtues of a good thinker (e.g., intellectual humility, curiosity), civic character includes individual qualities or virtues that create a good citizen (e.g., justice, civility), and performance character includes individual qualities or virtues that

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promote goal attainment (e.g., self-control, perseverance; Baehr, 2011; Colby et al., 2003; Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022; Lickona & Davidson, 2005).

The virtue framing is one of three common frames used to describe the purpose and outcomes (e.g., goals) of character-based programs (Handsman, 2021). Within this framing, virtue is seen as a critical component of a flourishing and purposeful life. Therefore, this framework recognizes the value of virtuous individuals and virtuous organizations as valuable ends in and of themselves. The other two types of outcome framing—reducing negative behaviors and promoting academic achievement—that Handsman (2021) identifies, depict character education in a more instrumental light. In these frames, character is a means to some other end, something that can or should be modified to achieve certain outcomes such as a reduction in aggressive behavior or better grades at school.

One final example of a commonly used framing for character initiatives, especially in schools and workplaces, is that of *character strengths* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This framing draws upon both virtue ethics and positive psychology, emphasizing psychological health and growth. Similar to the virtue framing, scholars have proposed different subcategories for character strengths. Peterson and Seligman (2004) initially proposed six categories that fall under the virtue headings of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. More recent empirical research suggests that character strengths can be categorized into three groups: interpersonal, intrapersonal, and intellectual (Park et al., 2017), with the Character Lab offering the helpful labeling of strengths of heart, strengths of will, and strengths of mind (Character Lab, 2022).

The specific definition and framing that each funding organization adopts will be related to the changes they seek in the world and will influence the types of research and programming they seek to support. Although there is variation in definitions across funders, most organizations that are interested in supporting character initiatives seek a world in which individuals are motivated to think and act in ways that are positive for the individual as well as their communities. The next section of this chapter provides specific examples of types of approaches and initiatives.

Historical Context

In the United States, there have historically been three major funding sources of character programming and research: the federal government, state governments, and private philanthropy. Federal and state funding for character initiatives largely appeared in the 1990s and early 2000s, with private philanthropy beginning a bit earlier and continuing today. Notably, much of the focus of federal and state funding has recently shifted from character education to social emotional learning, which overlaps with, but is conceptually distinct from character development and character education (Edutopia, 2011; see also Lerner et al., 2021, Figure 1).

Federal Funding

In the 1990s and 2000s, reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) allocated significant funds for character education in schools. The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, a reauthorization of the ESEA signed into law by President Bill Clinton, established the Partnerships in Character Education Pilot Project. Categorized a "program of national significance," this project allocated $8 million a year to grants to state education agencies to design and implement character education programs in schools. The program requirements aligned with Clinton's description of character education as "a vital part of building the kind of society that recognizes responsibilities and has a sense of community" (Clinton, 1996, p. 725): projects had to

involve parents, students, and community members; evaluate outcomes such as discipline, student and staff morale, and participation in extracurricular activities; and focus on one or more social character "elements," including caring, civic virtue and citizenship, justice and fairness, respect, responsibility, and trustworthiness (although grantees were allowed to focus on other appropriate character elements in addition to, or instead of, those listed).

Forty-five states and Washington, D.C. received grants to support projects of up to $1 million and 5 years in length (US Department of Education, 2008). As one example, Georgia's grant supported 25 schools in implementing character education curricula guided by the Character Education Partnership's (now known as Character.org) "Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education" (Lickona et al., 2003). The grant to Indiana resulted in the development and piloting of two age-specific character programs, as well as the establishment of a university center focused on providing character education resources and funding to schools. A report by the US Department of Education (2008) described the Pilot Project as "an important first step in defining and promoting the shared responsibility of character education" across families, schools, and communities (p. 9). Through the development and testing of character education models, the creation of relevant resources (including publications), professional training for teachers, and the identification of challenges in implementing character initiatives, the Pilot Project grants laid the foundation for further character education initiatives in schools.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, signed into law by President George W. Bush, expanded annual funding for character education to $25 million. Similar to the Pilot Project, the Partnerships in Character Education Program offered grants to support the design and implementation of character education programs in schools. It also expanded the eligibility for grants to include local education agencies in addition to states, allowed grantees greater flexibility in identifying and selecting character elements for their programming, and required that programs were both motivated by scientific research and linked to potential improvements in academic achievement. Although there is not a comprehensive report of the grants awarded through this program, a 2011 US House of Representatives report noted that from 2004 to 2009, funds were distributed to 20 states, Guam, and Washington, D.C. (H.R. Rep. No. 112–106, 2011). Another report numbered the grants awarded between 2003 and 2007 at 58 (Person et al., 2009). The program was last funded in 2009 (Office of Management and Budget, Executive Office of the President, 2009); the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (the most recent reauthorization of the ESEA, under President Barack Obama) did not include funds specifically allocated to character education.

State Funding

Between 1993 and 2004, 23 states passed or edited legislation encouraging or mandating character education in schools (Glanzer & Milson, 2006). During this time, however, few state codes specifically addressed *funding* for character education initiatives (only six states were noted in Glanzer & Milson's report; at least one of these states [Iowa] has since removed such funding information; Iowa Code § 256.18, 1994/2002/2003/2009). Some states continue to offer funds for character education, although these funds are often small compared to those for other priorities in education. For example, Arizona's Character Educating Matching Grant Program allocates $200,000 per year in matching funds to schools implementing a character education curriculum from a pre-approved list of providers (Arizona Department of Education, n.d.; Office of the State Treasurer Arizona, n.d.). In 2021, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Idaho legislators updated the state code to include the Public School Digital Content and Curriculum Fund. This fund offers grants of up to $50,000 to local education agencies to implement digital content or curricula related to character

education, among other areas (e.g., career technical education, reading and mathematics; Idaho Code § 33-4804, 1994/1998/2009/2020).

Private Philanthropy

Whereas federal and state funding for character education have primarily focused on the K–12 space, private philanthropies have supported character efforts targeting various settings, contexts, and life stages. There are numerous private foundations and individual donors who are interested in supporting character initiatives. Three of the largest foundations include the Kern Family Foundation, the recently closed S.D. Bechtel Jr. Foundation, and JTF. The Kern Family Foundation (founded in 1998) has made significant investments in higher education and professional training. Their grants include $87.9 million to the Medical College of Wisconsin since 2017 to support the integration of character and flourishing into medical education and practice (Medical College of Wisconsin, 2022). The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation (founded in 1957 and closed in 2020) dedicated $130 million from 2014 to 2020 to building the capacity of a group of youth-serving organizations and documenting best practices for adults' facilitation of youth character development (S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, 2020). JTF (founded in 1987) has funded character development programs and research across the entire lifespan. Its research portfolio seeks to generate insights into the development of character, from the emergence of forgiveness in early childhood to age-related changes in gratitude later in life. Its programmatic work includes funding to support program development, implementation, evaluation, and scaling, with a particular emphasis on science-informed practice. JTF's most recent funding competition in this area, Character Through Community, resulted in $20 million in awards to organizations that are interested in strengthening their work on character development. In the next section, we discuss philanthropic funding strategies in more detail.

Philanthropic Approaches to Character Development

As mentioned elsewhere in this *Handbook*, the process of character development occurs *across* the life span; *within* multiple settings, including the home, school, faith communities, and out-of-school activities such as scouting and sports; and *through* a variety of methods such as modeling, teaching, and service opportunities. Given this wide range of ages, contexts, and methods, each philanthropic funder identifies their own personal investment strategy. This personal investment strategy for each funding organization typically reflects the values and life experiences of the donor(s), as well as the cultural zeitgeist that was present during the funding organization's establishment. Some funders focus their investments on specific ages (e.g., elementary age children), specific contexts (e.g., elementary schools), specific methods (e.g., school curricula for teachers), and/or specific geographic locations (e.g., the city of Chicago). Often, when a funder focuses on specific ages, contexts, methods, or locations, this limitation is clearly articulated in the materials documenting the funders' approach to funding.

What is often less clearly communicated is a philanthropic funder's *theory of change*, which is sometimes known as their *theory of action.* Geneva Global (2018), a consulting firm specializing in philanthropy, notes that a theory of change "articulates how we believe change will happen, and as a result, how we plan to invest time and resources to contribute to that change." According to Geneva Global, a philanthropist's theory of change should explain (1) the current situation, (2) the hoped-for change in the world, and (3) the activities/projects that will help shift the situation from its current state to the hoped-for state. A philanthropist's theory of change is rooted in the types of changes they hope to see in the world, which will then influence the types of approaches that they choose to fund.

Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (n.d.) has developed a five-question method to help philanthropists and funding organizations determine the types of approaches they plan to fund. This method builds off the five simple questions of *what, how, where, who,* and *when.* Rockefeller encourages funding organizations to identify *what change they seek*. Within character development, that might range from impacting the school climate at one university to ensuring all youth, across the nation, have access to excellent character programming. Second, after establishing the *what,* the *how* is established, with funding organizations identifying the types of approaches they believe will lead to the change. Finally, a funding organization needs to establish *where* the change will occur, *who* is impacted, and *when* will the change become evident. These last three questions are particularly important because they help identify measurable benchmarks for the funding organizations. Measurable benchmarks allow funding organizations evaluate their approaches and the assumptions underlying these approaches, helping them to continue to learn and their strategies to evolve.

The remainder of this section includes an outline of how different theories of change would lead funders to focus on different approaches to character development. We will focus on the following key approaches: general operating support for programs; programmatic projects focused on innovation, evaluation, or scaling; catalyzing ideas through basic research; strengthening systems; changing cultures; and disseminating ideas and resources.

General Operating Support for Programs

One basic approach to philanthropic investing is providing unrestricted grants for general operating support. An unrestricted grant means that the donating organization is offering the grant with minimal constraints: the organization's leadership can allocate the funds in any way they believe will be most beneficial to the organization. A funding organization may choose this approach when an applicant organization's mission and activities align closely with the mandate of the funder. This type of approach is rooted in a movement known as trust-based philanthropy (Trust Based Philanthropy, n.d.), which seeks to shift decision-making power from the funders to the grantees. It has multiple strengths. It is flexible for the grantee—as circumstances change for the organization, they can quickly pivot in their approach. Often, the reporting requirements for the grantee are quite minimal, saving the grantee time and effort in their communications with the funder. At the end of an unrestricted grant for general operating support, the grant recipient typically presents on the progress they have made toward their goals.

Project-Based Support for Programs

Many funding organizations choose to focus on project-based funding approaches. Project-based approaches are time-limited grants with specific goals, usually focused on a subset of the organization's activities. Ideally, a project-based grant creates a strong alignment between a set of shared goals between the funding organization and the grantee. Three common foci for programmatic project-based grants within character virtue development are innovation, evaluation, and scaling.

Innovation

Progress in our understanding of character development, along with advances in technology, present multiple opportunities for organizations and individuals to develop new innovations focused on character development. Numerous opportunities for innovation exist within the technology space as smartphones, social media, and the metaverse continue to change how children, teenagers,

and adults live, work, play, and pray. Additionally, character development scholars continue to deepen our understanding of the nuances of character development. For instance, whereas some of the necessary prerequisites of positive character development have been known for decades (e.g., the importance of at least one caring, devoted adult in a child's life), scholars are now focused on a more detailed explanation—*which* interventions are effective, for *whom*, and under *what* circumstances (Lerner & Bornstein, 2021). These nuances provide excellent opportunities for new innovative methods for character development.

Evaluation

Evaluations can play a critical role in the success of character development programs. Urban et al. (2014) identify how evaluation can help shape programs from their initiation through a full scaling of the program to multiple locations. When a program is new, an effective evaluation structure can provide rapid, iterative feedback to program staff, helping staff to maximize the efficacy of the program potential. Evaluations can also focus on the *process* of implementing programs, which help program staff understand how to effectively implement and run programs. Understanding effective implementation is especially important when looking toward scaling a program. Evaluations can be helpful when programs are seeking to describe the impacts and effects of their programs. A nuanced and thorough evaluation can help program staff members to "tell their story" using a variety of different types of data, and evaluations can help capture the impact of a program. For all these reasons, philanthropic organizations may choose to invest in funding program evaluations.

Scaling

Philanthropic investors in character development are often interested in supporting programs that can "scale." A program is scalable if (a) the programmatic aspects of what makes a program effective are understood and (b) those elements can be successfully replicated in different settings. A common philanthropic approach is to support a program to replicate itself in a new location or setting, effectively taking what works in one setting and duplicating it in another setting. Effective scaling often involves supporting work to help adjust the program to the cultural context of the new location, a process which helps ensure the program is rooted within the local culture, while maintaining the key elements that led to the initial desire to scale and replicate the successful program.

Strengthening Systems

Often, a funder's theory of change involves the broader system of character development scholars and programs. Through their relationships across different programs and scholars, funders can begin to develop a broader perspective of who is involved in specific aspects of work on character development. A funder may invest in different strategies intended to strengthen the broader system of character development in a particular area. Two strategies that are intended to strength systems are forming networks and resource development.

Forming Networks

Due to their numerous funding relationships with a diversity of programs and institutions, funders are occasionally able to recognize when different programs and/or scholars may benefit from collaboration. Often, funders recognize that each funding partner has a unique strength or

insight that would benefit the broader field. To foster this collaboration, funders may network several of their grantees to help foster shared leaning across the system. Networks can serve various functions. Typically, the primary function is to facilitate efficient communication—often to share lessons learned—with the networked organization often having some method to engage within one another. This function can take the form of the occasional in-person meeting, webinars, Slack channel, or email listserv. This communication enables organizations to share positive developments, but just as importantly, it provides organizations with a structured setting to share what *is not working*. Although what *is working* is often rightly celebrated, organizations focused on character development often have limited opportunities to share struggles and setbacks. Increased transparency on what is not working, shared through a network of peers, enables organizations to seek advice, avoid dead ends already identified by others, and brainstorm solutions.

Networks are also useful when a funder is looking to shift an entire system in a specific direction. Here, a funder can draw together several key institutions within a particular system to establish specific, systems-level goals. One example of this network is the Kern National Network for Caring and Character in Medicine (KNN). The Kern Family Foundation established this network with the following three major purposes: transforming medical and health professions education using the concepts of caring and character, working with healthcare organizations to influence cultures and environments, and sharing knowledge and engaging partners toward broader policy and systems change (KNN, n.d.). Another example is the Raikes Foundation leading a group of foundations and other institutions and schools to establish the Building Equitable Learning Environments Network (BELE Network). These leaders sought to establish the BELE Network to envision and to try to create an educational system in the United States that prioritizes the learning and development of every student (BELE Network, n.d.). These funders established these networks to accomplish specific systems-level changes; systems-level goals like these are often best accomplished by coordinating the work of multiple partners.

Developing Resources

The development of resources focused on character development is another philanthropic approach designed to strengthen the broader system. Resources may include items such as teacher curricula, best practice guidelines, tip sheets, checklists, playbooks, and other useable interventions that practitioners or learners can use to better implement their character development practices. JTF has supported numerous institutions to develop theory-based, empirically informed resources for the broader field of character development. A selection of examples includes the following: playbooks developed by the Character Lab, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues's Framework for Character Education in Schools, University of California Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center's Greater Good in Action practices, and the tip sheets produced by the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia's Center for Parent and Teen Communication. By investing in these resources, JTF hopes to equip individual teachers, parents, and students themselves to become engaged in excellent and effective practices.

Basic Research

Finally, some philanthropic funders of character development maintain a focus on basic research on character development. Basic research can have several different meanings, and here we are using the term to distinguish basic research on character development from research that specifically

focuses on the effectiveness of a specific program or intervention. In this sense, basic research in character development seeks to deepen the field's insights into specific questions surrounding how different character strengths develop over the course of the lifetime. Effective interventions are often informed by basic research that has revealed insights into questions such as the following: how do we conceptualize and best measure the character strength over its developmental trajectory, what differences in the development of a specific character strength emerge between different individuals and between different cultures, what environmental and personal factors contribute to the development of this character strength (e.g., parenting practices and school environment), what other personal qualities does this character strength influence (e.g., academic performance, relationship health), and how does this character strength interact with other character strengths. Excellent interventions and practices stand on the strength of a strong and ever evolving understanding to these questions, and so foundations such as JTF continue to invest in deepening the field's understanding on how character develops.

Challenges

Grantmaking in any area comes with associated challenges, including developing evidence-informed theories, the difficulty of measuring impact, identifying the right interventions for complicated social problems, and selecting the most promising projects among many. However, there are also several challenges that are specific to funding in character development that should be considered.

One of the most significant challenges is the language and related politics of the term *character*. A second important challenge is the difficulty of measuring a complex construct, especially when organizations such as JTF are interested in how character develops over time. Finally, when considering how to increase impact, many funding organizations look to scale the interventions they support. Given the nature of character development, however, there are inherent challenges to scaling up programs.

Language and Politics

Support for the term *character* is varied. For example, although K–12 practitioners and policymakers often use multiple terms—interchangeably—to describe "non-academic" or "non-cognitive" skills, a survey of 1,600 K–12 professionals found that *character* was perceived as more conservative and outdated than other terms (Loeb et al., 2016). Another survey probed 2,000 American parents' attitudes toward *social and emotional learning* and related terms (e.g., *character education/development, emotional intelligence*, *positive youth development*). When asked to identify the programs—by name alone—that they would most or least want their child enrolled in (from a list of 12), character ended up in the middle of the pack (Tyner, 2021). Others have criticized *character* as being unclear, fundamentally religious, or anti-democratic (see Kristjánsson, 2013). Such perceptions can affect individuals', communities', and institutions' appetites for engaging with character initiatives.

For example, a perceived connection between character education/social and emotional learning and "critical race theory" have led some parents to protest the teaching of character in schools (e.g., Meckler, 2022; Reeves, 2022), and motivated at least one proposed state bill to broadly ban programming that addresses non-academic factors in public schools (Breasette, 2022). Advocates for the usage of the term character note that the conception of "character" as an enduring disposition oriented toward the "common good" has rich roots within philosophical theory, multiple

religious traditions, and democratic political theory. This term has endured while other faddish concepts have come and gone over the decades (e.g., self-esteem).

Measurement

To determine the impact—or potential impact—of a particular character intervention, grantmakers need to know whether the particular intervention is associated with gains in character. However, measuring an individual's character (at any given point in time) and character development (over time) can be difficult. The first set of challenges related to measuring character is inherent in the methods of measurement themselves, not character specifically; these include limitations around self-report, other-report, and performance tasks. In their article on the subject, Duckworth and Yeager (2015) recommend using a multi-method approach to address these common limitations (but note that doing so can be time or resource intensive).

For character-related constructs in particular, researchers will often look at an aspect of an individual's character in specific contexts; for example, examining the role of self-distancing for increasing self-control (White & Carlson, 2015) or exploring the effects of witnessing an act of gratitude (Walsh et al., 2022). Virtues that are somewhat easier to define and assess—such as self-control, empathy, gratitude, and forgiveness—have a greater number of reliable and valid measures that have been used in a variety of interventions (e.g., Friese et al., 2017; Ma et al., 2017; Teding van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016; Wade et al., 2014). However, more progress is still needed in other areas such as humility, love, and curiosity. Research in these areas has received renewed attention, especially as it relates to measurement, in the past decade (e.g., Kashdan et al., 2018; McElroy-Heltzel et al., 2018), but we do not yet have a canonical set of measures for these constructs.

Finally, it can be exceedingly difficult to capture an individual's full character—as opposed to a specific virtue—at a given point in time, or an individual's growth in character over time. Several new lines of research have emerged in the past decade that begin to help us understand how to tackle these important questions, both from a conceptual and methodological perspective (e.g., Jayawickreme & Fleeson, 2017; Lerner, 2019; Miller, 2014; Wang et al., 2015). As more researchers tackle the challenges of measuring character, the field moves ever closer to a set of valid and reliable measures that help us understand an individual's character across time and place.

Scaling

Scaling any intervention poses challenges: it requires sufficient organizational capacity to support scaling efforts, a program tested in one context may not easily translate to another, or insufficient buy-in or training can affect an intervention's success in new settings. Interventions developed in the lab may never make it into the community, especially if publications lack detailed implementation information (see Premachandra & Lewis, 2020). Character interventions can prove particularly difficult to scale because *what works* is often a particular, supportive person—character does not develop in a vacuum but rather is cultivated in the context of close relationships and communities (Brooks, 2020; Snyder, 2019).

When asked to reflect on how their own character had developed, people often report that they were inspired by a parent or other positive role model (National Academies of Sciences Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). Such adults are also integral to creating environments that promote individual growth. These relationships require time and trust to develop—which can be difficult in settings with high turnover or other competing demands (such as afterschool programs or the classroom).

Looking Forward

Despite the challenges noted above, or perhaps in part because of them, grantmaking in character development has become more robust over the past 40 years. Philanthropic approaches have expanded significantly beyond the traditional school-based program to include interventions in a wider range of contexts and that move beyond implementation to include innovation, evaluation, and scaling promising programs. The current diversity of approaches to funding character research and programs is valuable, focusing on different aspects of the child's ecosystem. Snyder (2019) provides a helpful recent account of exemplary character programs that also includes questions that funders and character organizations should consider when thinking about how to impact character outcomes.

One notable recent trend in philanthropy is the rise of funder collaboratives and pooled funding (Powell et al., 2019, 2021). These collaboratives allow for increased learning across organizations and increased potential for significant impact. This approach is particularly attractive for donors and organizations with lean staffing structures and those organizations who seek to initiate large-scale systemic change. According to a recent report from The Bridgespan Group, these collaboratives continue to increase in popularity and have the potential to disburse up to $15 billion annually (Powell et al., 2021).

Among funders, there is also an opportunity to facilitate connections across individuals and institutions. These connections could include introductions between researchers and practitioners; recommendations for advisors, speakers, or collaborators; or building communities across like-minded practitioners. For a field as diffuse and multifaceted as character, funding organizations can serve as a valuable facilitator of professional connections and networking. Many funding organizations likely facilitate these connections in more informal ways or perhaps simply within funding organizations. However, given the size and diffuse nature of the character community, this facilitation can and should also take place across organizations. It will likely also yield more innovation in research and programming, as applicants explore opportunities at the intersections of various disciplines and practice.

As researchers and practitioners continue to innovate, funding organizations should follow suit. Philanthropy as a practice benefits from continued feedback, learning, and experimentation. And just as certain programs are tailored for certain communities and certain outcomes, philanthropic approaches to character development should be tailored to the communities and outcomes the funder seeks to support. Science funders adapted to the global need for rapid research on COVID-19 with fast grants (Else, 2021). How can funders adapt to the current climate of grantmaking for character development? With an engaged funding community and a focus on improving the lives of individuals and communities, there is no shortage of opportunities for the future.

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