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THE ROLE OF CHARACTER AND CHARACTER  
EDUCATION IN FOSTERING STUDENT  
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Fostering the character development of young people has been a part of the American educational system since its inception. John and Elizabeth Phillips founded New Hampshire's Phillips Exeter Academy in 1781 to promote the "minds and morals of youth under their charge" (Phillips Exeter, 2014). Likewise, two of the founding fathers of American public education, Horace Mann and Thomas Jefferson, regarded education as a means of instilling in children qualities such as self-discipline, respect and loyalty necessary to develop into productive workers and citizens (McClellan, 1999). More contemporary educators such as Benjamin Mays (1971), mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr., and president of Atlanta's Morehouse College for nearly thirty years, asserted that the purpose of education is not only "to train the mind to think but the heart to feel . . . and to strengthen the will to act in the interest of the common good" (p. xxxviii).

The quotations in the preceding paragraph make clear that character development and schooling are inextricably interconnected and also that different educators have conceptualized character in very different ways. In this chapter, we rely upon the *APA Handbook of Educational Psychology's* definition of character as a set of psychological characteristics that motivate and enable individuals to function as competent and/or moral agents (Berkowitz, 2012). Even this definition, however, is arguably too broad to be useful to scholars or practitioners because it includes characteristics related to competence such as conscientiousness and perseverance as well as characteristics related to moral matters such as integrity and empathy. For this reason, we find it useful to parse our definition of character into several discrete categories. Specifically, Lickona and Davidson (2005) have called for conceptualizing character as consisting of moral character strengths and performance character strengths. Moral character is a relational orientation that consists of the qualities such as empathy and integrity that allow for successful interpersonal relationships (such as with teachers and peers) and ethical behavior (as manifest in prosocial and responsible behavior at school) (Lickona &

Davidson, 2005; Noddings, 2002). Performance character is a mastery orientation consisting of the qualities that allow individuals to regulate their thoughts and actions in ways that support achievement in endeavors ranging from academics to athletics (Davidson, Khmlekov & Baker, 2011). Berkowitz and Puka (2009) have suggested that an important distinction between these two types of character is that performance character strengths can be directed toward both ethical and unethical pursuits while moral character strengths represent “interpersonal ethical imperatives.”

Drawing on several scholars’ work on civic development (e.g. Boston, 2005; Levinson, 2012a; Shields, 2011), Seider (2012) called for civic character to be conceptualized as comprising a distinct set of character strengths as well. Civic character can be defined as the “knowledge, skills and commitments necessary for engaged and responsible citizenship” (Shields, 2011, p. 49). If moral character strengths allow for an individual to engage in ethical interactions and relationships with other individuals, civic character strengths such as social responsibility and tolerance allow an individual to be an ethical and active participant in the various communities (including one’s school community) of which he or she is a member (Seider, 2012).

In the sections that follow, we review the extant research literature on character education and school success through the lens of these three types of character strengths: moral, performance and civic. We acknowledge that these distinctions are neither absolute nor airtight; however, we have found this moral-performance-civic framework to be useful in our own work on character development and character education, and we believe it will serve a similar purpose in reviewing a broad and oftentimes ill-defined body of scholarship.

## MORAL CHARACTER AND STUDENT SUCCESS

Harvard psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1975, 1984), a key influence on contemporary scholarship on moral character development, argued that the primary lever in promoting moral character development was strengthening individuals’ capacity to engage in *reasoning* about their moral and ethical responsibilities in a given situation (Kohlberg & Candee, 1984; Rest, Narvaez, Thoma & Bebeau, 2000). Other scholars such as Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (2002) have countered Kohlberg’s focus on cognition by emphasizing the affective dimensions of moral character development—specifically, the importance of fostering students’ ability to engage in caring and compassionate relationships. Still other scholars such as Haidt (2012) and Greene (2014) have argued that individuals possess intuitions about the moral course of action in a given situation, which only later do they seek to justify through reasoning. While there continues to be debate about the most effective mechanisms for fostering moral character development, perhaps the two most researched moral character strengths are empathy and integrity, which we consider in turn below.

### *Empathy*

Empathy refers, most simply, to a tendency to react to another’s experiences and possesses both cognitive and affective dimensions (Davis, 1983). The cognitive dimension of empathy is an ability to engage in perspective taking, that is, to view situations from a third-person perspective by taking account of one’s own and others’ subjective perspectives (Eisenberg, 1990). The affective component is characterized by feelings of warmth, compassion and concern for others (Barr & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2007).

Research suggests that empathy is positively associated with prosocial behaviors and negatively associated with antisocial behaviors (Wentzel, Fillisetti & Looney, 2007). For example, Adams (1983) and Schonert-Reichl (1993) have found empathy to be an important factor in building and maintaining adolescents' peer relationships. High levels of empathy also predict an adolescents' likelihood of helping a classmate being bullied (Gini et al., 2007), and, conversely, children and teenagers who engage in frequent bullying demonstrate lower levels of empathic concern (though not perspective taking) than non-bullies (Ireland, 1999; Joliffe & Farrington, 2006).

Several scholars have reported a moderate relationship between empathy and academic success (Caprara et al., 2000; Parker et al., 2004; Wentzel, 1993). Caprara and colleagues (2000) reported that elementary school children who engage in high levels of helping, sharing and other empathic behaviors are significantly more likely to demonstrate high levels of academic achievement as adolescents. Likewise, children's empathy levels at age nine significantly predict their achievement on reading and spelling tests two years later as 11-year-olds (Feshbach & Feshbach, 1987). Other scholars have found that academically gifted children demonstrate, on average, higher levels of empathy and moral sensitivity than their non-gifted peers (Tirri & Nokelainen, 2007). Cumulatively, these research studies offer preliminary evidence of a relationship between empathy and academic achievement.

Scholars have found that empathy levels typically increase from infancy to late adolescence (Davis & Franzoi, 1991; Eisenberg, 1990). However, much of the research on the cultivation of empathy in youth has focused on the role of parents rather than educators. Researchers have found that highly empathic youth are, on average, raised by parents who are low in controlling punishment styles (Krevans & Gibbs, 1996; Strayer & Roberts, 2004) and high in warmth and responsiveness (Davidov & Grusec, 2006). We consider the implications of such research for educators in an upcoming section of this review.

### *Integrity*

In a schooling context, integrity is typically defined as a commitment to honesty in one's work through avoidance of behaviors such as cheating and plagiarism (Ghaf-fari, 2008; Kisamore, Stone & Jawahar, 2007). Unfortunately, a sizable body of evidence suggests that many American youth engage frequently in both types of behavior (Miller, Shoptaugh & Woodridge, 2011; Stephens & Nicholson, 2008). Steinberg (1996) reported that two-thirds of American middle school students reported cheating on a test in the past year, and 90% admitted to having copied another student's homework. Even higher rates of cheating are reported in American secondary schools (Strom & Strom, 2008).

Youth become more likely to engage in cheating behaviors as they transition from elementary school to middle school, and explanations for this shift have been attributed to the increasing importance placed on academic marks by students' parents and teachers; heightened competition among classmates; and more superficial relationships with teachers (Anderman, Griesinger & Westerfield, 1998; Murdock, Hale & Weber, 2001). Support for these hypotheses can be found in the higher levels of cheating behaviors by adolescents who report worrying about their performance on tests and examinations (Rost & Wild, 1990); attending schools that emphasize competition and grades (Stephens, 2005); and in classrooms where students perceive the teacher to be incompetent, uncaring or unfair (Calabrese & Cochran, 1990; Evans & Craig,

1990). Other researchers have found that willingness to engage in cheating behaviors relates negatively to an individual's ability to engage in moral reasoning (Fabes, Carlo, Kupanoff & Laible, 1999; Kohlberg & Candee, 1984).

Over the past thirty years, there has been an important shift in the research literature on the relationship between student achievement and academic integrity. Specifically, in the 1980s and 1990s, several researchers reported that cheating behaviors were most often committed by low-achieving students (Gardner et al., 1988; McCabe & Trevino, 1997). Over the past decade, however, other scholars have reported that high-achieving students are equally likely to engage in cheating behaviors (Anderman & Murdock, 2007; Stephens, Romakin & Yukhymenko, 2010). These researchers have found that cheating behaviors are particularly prevalent among high-achieving students with low levels of academic self-efficacy and in school contexts that strongly emphasize academic grades and performance (Finn & Frone, 2004; Wangaard & Stephens, 2011). Likewise, students planning to attend college and who are enrolled in college preparatory classes have been found to be more likely to engage in cheating behaviors than peers without such plans for tertiary education (Carter, 2009; Taylor, Pogrebin & Dodge, 2002). Finally, scholars have found a relationship between likelihood of engaging in cheating behaviors and parental pressure to earn high academic marks (Abelard & Parker, 2007). An emerging consensus, then, is that the relationship between academic integrity and academic achievement may be a U-shaped one in which the students most likely to engage in cheating behaviors are both the low achievers and high achievers within a particular school context (McCabe, Butterfield & Trevino, 2012; Stephens & Gelhbach, 2007).

### *Fostering Moral Character in School*

The existing research literature on moral character development offers a number of useful implications for K–12 educators for fostering moral character strengths in their students. Drawing on parenting scholarship, educators can support the development of their students' empathy through an authoritative (high nurture, high control) rather than authoritarian (low nurture, high control) teaching style (Davidov & Grusec, 2006). Sustained involvement during high school in extracurricular activities such as theater and arts programs (Catterall, Chappleau & Iwanaga, 1999) and community service learning (Billig, 2000; Lakin & Mahoney, 2006) has also been shown to correlate positively with students' empathy development. Relatedly, philosophical inquiry and reflection can engage students in thinking about their responsibilities to other individuals and groups with whom they interact (Damon & Killen, 1982; Kruger, 1992; Self, Olivarez & Baldwin, 1998) and, in so doing, can strengthen students' skill in perspective taking, a core component of empathy (Eisenberg, 1990; Selman, 2003).

In terms of strengthening academic integrity, Stearns (2001) found that students are less likely to engage in dishonest behaviors when they perceive their teacher to be skilled, fair and caring in his or her teaching practices. Stephens (2005) reports that secondary students are less likely to cheat when their instructor emphasizes mastery goals (i.e. learning the course content well) over performance goals (i.e. earning a good grade). Other researchers have found that developing an honor code (McCabe & Trevino, 1997) and involving students in adjudicating violations of the honor code (Wangaard & Stephens, 2011) have a positive effect upon a student body's commitment to acting with integrity. Finally, scholars have found that a key predictor of students' willingness to cheat on tests or assignments is their beliefs about the frequency with which

their classmates engage in cheating behaviors (Wangaard & Stephens, 2011). In other words, many students take their cues about academic integrity from the behaviors of their classmates.

## PERFORMANCE CHARACTER AND STUDENT SUCCESS

As described in the introduction of this chapter, performance character strengths are those that allow individuals to regulate their thoughts and actions in ways that support achievement in a particular endeavor (Lickona & Davidson, 2005). Two key performance character strengths are perseverance and curiosity, which we consider in turn below. While the second decade of the 21st century has seen an amplification of interest among K–12 educators in qualities such as grit and tenacity, these qualities have also been a focus of the American education system since its inception. Kaestle (1983) has written that, in America’s 19th-century common school movement, “Far more emphasis was placed on character, discipline, virtue and good habits than on literacy, arithmetic skills, analytical ability or knowledge of the world” (p. 100).

### *Perseverance*

A robust body of scholarship details the relationship between student achievement and performance character strengths such as persistence, grit and self-discipline (e.g. Duckworth & Seligman, 2006; Terman, 1947; Winner, 1997). Although there are minor differences in the definitions of these three character strengths that seek to distinguish them from one another, Farrington and colleagues (2012) classify all three as forms of academic perseverance—“an individual’s ability to stay focused on a goal despite short-term obstacles (persistence) or long-term obstacles (grit), and to forego distractions or temptations to prioritize higher pursuits over lower pleasures (self-discipline)” (p. 9).

Much of the scholarship on the development of performance character has focused on self-regulation, or an individual’s ability to control his or her thoughts and actions (Sokol et al., 2010). Overall, research shows that young children have poor regulatory abilities that improve with age (Sokol et al., 2010). For example, although two-year-olds can inhibit some behaviors, it is not until age five that children are able to inhibit behaviors over extended periods of time (Sokol et al., 2010). As children’s metacognitive abilities improve between the ages of five and seven (e.g. the development of the ability to engage in private speech), they also further improve their self-regulation (Sokol et al., 2010). Pintrich and Zusho (2002) proposed a four-stage model of childhood self-regulation development that includes: 1) goal setting and planning abilities; 2) metacognitive awareness; 3) the ability to exert effortful control; and 4) a reflective phase in children’s efforts to control their cognitions, motivations, behaviors and contexts. Importantly, Sokol and colleagues (2010) argue that maturation alone is not responsible for the development of self-regulation but that contextual factors such as caregiver and teacher scaffolding also play an important role.

A number of studies have demonstrated a relationship between academic perseverance and academic achievement. Scholars have reported a strong relationship linking academic perseverance to grade point average in university students (e.g. Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007; Wolfe & Johnson, 1995). For example, Wolfe and Johnson (1995) reported that self-discipline predicted college students’ grade point averages more accurately than did their SAT scores. Likewise, Duckworth and colleagues

(2007) found that undergraduates at an elite university who demonstrated high levels of grit also earned higher GPAs than their peers, even when controlling for intelligence.

Other scholars have reported on the relationship between these performance character strengths and academic achievement in gifted youth and adults (e.g. Duckworth et al., 2007; Ericsson et al., 1993; Winner, 1997). Ericsson and colleagues (1993) have demonstrated that the strongest predictor of expertise among chess players, musicians, mathematicians and neuroscientists is an ability to engage in sustained and deliberated practice. Likewise, Terman (1947) and Winner's (1997) studies of gifted children revealed perseverance to be a stronger predictor than intelligence of success in adulthood. Along similar lines, Duckworth's (2007) study of adolescent participants in the Scripps National Spelling Bee competition found grit to be the strongest predictor of advancement to the final rounds of the competition.

Perhaps most relevant to K–12 educators is recent scholarship by Duckworth and colleagues (2005, 2006, 2007) on self-discipline amongst US middle school students. In several studies of eighth-grade students, Duckworth and Seligman (2005, 2006) found self-discipline to be a stronger predictor than IQ of students' academic grades, school attendance, hours spent doing homework and acceptance into highly competitive high schools. According to these scholars, examples of school-related tasks requiring self-discipline include prioritizing homework over watching television and persisting on long-term assignment despite boredom and frustration. Likewise, Seider, Gilbert, Novick and Gomez (2013) found perseverance to be a significant predictor of grade point average in a sample of more than 500 urban middle school students.

### *Curiosity*

Another performance character strength central to student success is curiosity. Kashdan (2004) defines curiosity as "one's intrinsic desire for experience and knowledge" and includes the pursuit of challenging and novel experiences as important facets of curiosity (p. 125). A number of contextual factors are important for fostering curiosity, including a person's experience of autonomy, competence and relatedness in a given situation (Kashdan & Fincham, 2004). For instance, individuals exhibit greater curiosity when provided with and encouraged to make their own choices and when they feel they have sufficient background knowledge to readily accommodate any new knowledge gained from an experience (Kashdan, 2004; Kashdan & Fincham, 2004). Furthermore, researchers have reported that feelings of connectedness and validation of emotions do increase curiosity and that there is a bidirectional relationship between the two (Kashdan & Fincham, 2004). Finally, a number of researchers have found that individuals are less likely to display curiosity and are less likely to explore in high-anxiety environments (Kashdan & Roberts, 2004; Kashdan & Silvia, 2009). Likewise, Peters (1978) found that, in school environments that are considered non-threatening, students high in trait curiosity ask five times as many questions than those with low trait curiosity.

Research has linked curiosity to a number of academic and cognitive behaviors and abilities, including facilitating complex decision making (Kreitler et al., 1974) and goal perseverance (Sansone & Smith, 2000). Likewise, researchers have found that students high in curiosity score higher on achievement tests (Alberti & Witryol, 1994) and IQ tests (Raine, Reynolds, Venables & Mednick, 2002). Other researchers have found that curiosity is moderated by a person's achievement orientation and achievement goals. Specifically, Harackiewicz and Elliot (1993) have found that

low-achievement-oriented individuals display higher curiosity when focusing on mastery goals, and high-achievement individuals display higher curiosity when focusing on performance goals.

A robust body of research regarding interest and academic outcomes has shown positive relationships. Scholars have reported that interest accounts for approximately 10% of the variance in academic achievement for 5th- through 12th-grade students and that this interest-achievement relationship is not subject specific (Schiefele, Krapp & Winteler, 1992). However, the relationship between interest and achievement grows increasingly important at higher grade levels and predicts twice as much of the variation in achievement in male students as female students (Schiefele, Krapp & Winteler, 1992). Furthermore, Renninger and Wozniak (1985) found that children are able to better recall items they were previously interested in, and Hidi (1990) found that students better understood readings on highly interesting topics. Sansone, Wiebe and Morgan (1999) have also found that individuals can use interest to regulate their behavior on uninteresting but important tasks, which, in turn, allows these students to sustain their motivation and increase their performance (Kashdan, Steger & Breen, 2007).

### *Fostering Performance Character in School*

The scholarship on performance character development offers numerous strategies and mechanisms by which parents, educators and coaches can foster academic perseverance and curiosity in youth. For clarity, we parse these strategies and mechanisms below into whole-school, classroom, curriculum and goal setting.

#### *Whole-School Strategies*

At the whole-school level, educators and other stakeholders within a school building can strive to make their school a “positive institution” by providing a warm, welcoming environment that includes explicit opportunities for students to learn about and hone particular character strengths (Park & Peterson, 2009). Positive institutions are sites in which the community and/or culture support members’ development or utilization of particular character strengths, allowing them to flourish (Levin, 2014). For example, Seider (2012) reported on the various levers that the Roxbury Preparatory Charter School in Boston, Massachusetts utilized to support middle school students’ development of perseverance. In advisory, sixth-grade students learned how to develop study schedules for the weeks leading up to their mid-year exams, and eighth-grade students engaged in the deliberate practice necessary to hone their interviewing skills for admission to elite secondary schools. In weekly whole-school community meetings, competitions such as the Pi Recitation Contest and “Element” Bee celebrated the perseverance and self-discipline necessary to memorize digits of Pi or learn the symbols on the periodic table. Through these and other practices, Roxbury Preparatory Charter School sought to be a positive institution for students’ development of persistence, grit and self-discipline.

#### *Classroom-Based Strategies*

Other scholars have focused upon classroom-based strategies for fostering students’ performance character. For example, mental contrasting refers to the practice of

explicitly envisioning a goal one seeks to achieve and comparing that goal to one's present conditions (Oettingen et al., 2009). Implementation intentions are the specific steps one needs to take in order to achieve that goal (Parks-Stamm, Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 2007). Scholars have found that engaging secondary students in mental contrasting with implementation intentions around a particular goal such as achieving a high score on the Scholastic Aptitude Test leads students to demonstrate significantly higher levels of academic perseverance in preparing for that particular goal (Duckworth, Grant, Loew, Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2011). Likewise, a major area of direct strategy instruction related to curiosity involves teaching children inquiry and questioning behaviors. Engel (2013) encourages teachers to count and categorize the amount and type of questions students ask in their classrooms and to make asking questions a goal of their activities. Inherent in this suggestion is the idea that educators also must give students time to be curious, such as to ask questions and seek answers through various routes (Engel, 2013; Ritchhart, 2002). Similarly, Ritchhart (2002) espouses the development of classroom routines, such as brainstorming and webbing, specifically tailored toward thinking dispositions (e.g. curiosity, metacognition, open-mindedness) as a method of direct instruction promoting curiosity.

### *Curriculum*

Classroom topics and materials can also impact the development of curiosity. Research shows that educators need to talk about what interests and perplexes their students in order to foster their students' urge to know more. One study found that students in a social studies class who were encouraged to focus on controversy and understanding over "learning the facts" showed more curiosity and learned more information than the opposing group (Lowry & Johnson, 1981). In foundational research on curiosity, Berlyne (1960) argued that curiosity is evoked by novelty, complexity, uncertainty and conflict in a person's environment. Additionally, Engel (2011) argues that students are curious about intangible concepts, abstract ideas, unfamiliar places and personal examples from their teachers. Finally, in presenting interesting topics in the classroom, Kashdan and Fincham (2004) argue that the real-world applications and personal value of topics should always be made apparent to students.

### *Goals and Feedback*

A classroom's orientation toward mastery or performance goal structure can also impact levels of curiosity. Engel (2011) notes that one of the major detractors to curiosity development is a classroom environment focused on performance goals (demonstrations of knowledge) rather than mastery goals (understanding and learning of material). In an experiment where teachers were primed to help a student either "learn about science" or "complete a worksheet," the teachers who had been primed to help the student "learn about science," allowed for curiosity and deviations from the prescribed task, whereas teachers primed to help the student "complete a worksheet" quashed students' displays of curiosity.

Another set of scholars interested in strengthening students' perseverance has focused on the importance of educators fostering students' growth mindsets (Blackwell, Trzseniewski & Dweck, 2007). Specifically, Dweck (2006) has argued that individuals can conceptualize intelligence or aptitude through a fixed (entity) mindset or a growth (incremental) mindset. Individuals who possess a fixed mindset regarding

intelligence or aptitude tend to regard their ability to be successful on a particular task as predicated upon innate qualities that they either do or do not possess while individuals with a growth mindset are more likely to perceive a particular task to be achievable through hard work and perseverance. These researchers have found that explicitly cultivating a growth mindset in middle school students can have a significant effect upon these students' academic achievement and willingness to persevere on a particular learning task or assignment (Dweck, Walton & Cohen, 2011). Other scholars have reported that exposing students in secondary science classrooms to stories of struggling scientists can improve their own academic performance in science (Hong & Lin, 2012).

A related body of scholarship to growth mindset has focused on constructive responding. Specifically, Yeager and colleagues (2013) have found that adolescents are much more likely to persevere on a particular learning task or assignment when they receive critical feedback accompanied by an explicit communication of high standards and belief in a student's potential to meet those standards. These scholars refer to such constructive responding as "wise feedback" and have demonstrated its positive effect upon both perseverance and achievement. Though preliminary in nature, a potentially important finding associated with this scholarship is that wise feedback was found to have a particularly robust effect upon the perseverance and achievement of African American students. If, as these scholars speculate, wise feedback has the potential to counteract some of the distrust that students from historically oppressed groups have expressed toward their schools and teachers (e.g. Brown & Bigler, 2005), then wise feedback has the potential to play a role in closing the achievement gap in the United States. Wise feedback is also potentially important for curiosity development; when teachers provide regular feedback on their students' progress, students are then able to identify gaps in their knowledge about which to be curious (Pluck & Johnson, 2011).

## CIVIC CHARACTER AND STUDENT SUCCESS

Civic character can be defined as the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for engaged and responsible citizenship (Shields, 2011; Verba et al., 1995). If moral character describes people's ability to engage in ethical relationships with other individuals, then civic character refers to people's ability and commitment to fulfill their responsibilities to the various communities of which they are members (Gardner, 2006). Two key civic character strengths are a sense of social responsibility (Youniss & Yates, 1997) and a commitment to political engagement (Hart et al., 2007), which we consider in turn below.

### *Social Responsibility*

Social responsibility can be defined as an individual's perceived level of interdependence and social concern to other members of one's community as well as to the broader society (Morais & Ogden, 2011; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) and as a developmental value orientation manifested in one's own beliefs and ways of living with others (Berman, 1997; Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011). Westheimer and Kahne (2004) have characterized the socially responsible citizen as one who acts upon a sense of obligation for the welfare of his or her community through a range of activities from giving blood to participating in community service to recycling.

Both cognitive and affective traits are theorized as important precursors to developing social responsibility (Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011). Those affective traits include empathy (Hoffman, 2000) and emotion regulation (Hart, Atkins & Fegley, 2003; Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011). Those cognitive traits include executive functioning skills, including inhibition, working memory and cognitive flexibility (Astuto & Ruck, 2010; Eisenberg, 2000); perspective taking (Hoffman, 2000); and socio-cognitive capacity for reasoning (Smetana & Villalobos, 2009). While feelings of social responsibility typically begin developing in early childhood, adolescence represents a particularly important period for social responsibility development, as individuals are beginning to consider their roles and responsibilities in the world beyond their own nuclear family or immediate community (Erikson, 1968). Moreover, emerging adult scholars argue that this heightened social responsibility development in adolescence is often then transformed into civic action during late adolescence and emerging adulthood (approximately ages 18–26), which, in the contemporary United States, has become the period of life in which many individuals possess the greatest balance of personal autonomy and freedom from familial responsibilities (Arnett, 2004). The effects of such autonomy on individuals' civic character development are further considered in the ensuing section on political engagement as well.

There is some evidence of a link between social responsibility and academic achievement (Oberle et al., 2014; Wentzel, 2013). In a longitudinal study of more than 450 middle school students, Oberle and colleagues (2014) found that social and emotional competence—as measured by teacher reports of students' social-emotional skills and student self-reports of social responsibility goals—independently predicted reading achievement in seventh grade. Interestingly, the relationship between social responsibility and achievement in this sample was found to be much stronger in boys than girls. Wentzel (2013) posits that social responsibility may be linked to academic performance because it can play a role in fostering positive relationships among teachers and peers (which in turn enhance the process of learning), and because the motivational components of social responsibility may contribute to the level at which students engage with academic material.

Social responsibility is also considered an important component of youth empowerment (e.g. Wagaman, 2011; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Wagaman (2011) created a youth empowerment framework in which social responsibility plays a significant, iterative role. Building on a model of social empathy (Segal, 2011), which includes individual empathy, contextual understanding and social responsibility, Wagaman argues that the development of youth empowerment begins with this foundation of social empathy and is solidified through relevant skill building. This model and framework are consistent with Youniss and Yates's (1997) research on social responsibility and community service in youth. Youniss and Yates examined high school students participating in a soup kitchen as a part of a social justice class. They posit that this kind of active community participation, grounded in social responsibility, can empower youth to view themselves as having agency in society.

### *Political Engagement*

McIntosh and Youniss (2010) characterize political engagement as having four key components: public thought and action, collaboration with others, participation in healthy conflict and recognition that political action is relevant to one's life. Individuals

typically develop a stronger sense of civic identity as they grow older, leading to higher levels of social responsibility and engagement in political activities such as voting (Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Yates & Youniss, 1997). On the other hand, adolescence and early adulthood represent the periods of life in which individuals possess the greatest levels of autonomy that enable them to participate in more intensive political activities such as protests, civil disobedience and other forms of activism (Wilson, 2000). Damon (2008) has noted, “There is reason to believe that a person’s crucial orientations to life incubate during adolescence. If civic concern is not among them, it may never arise” (p. 57). Scholars differ in their descriptions of the current state of political engagement in America’s youth, with some declaring “near-total civic ignorance” (Galston, 2004) and especially depressed levels in youth (Campbell, 2012a; Damon, 2008), while others are more optimistic, pointing to a steady rise of volunteerism and service learning in the 21st century (Levine, 2012).

Political efficacy is an important predictor of political engagement (Abrams & DeMoura, 2002; Beaumont, 2010; Becker, 2005; Levy, 2011a; McCluskey, Deshpande, Shah & McLeod, 2004), and a growing body of scholarship suggests that students who have had a chance to participate in democratic processes and to discuss public issues develop higher levels of political efficacy (Dressner, 1990; Levy, 2011a, 2011b; Morrell, 2005). For example, Levy (2011b) has reported that high school students involved in civic advocacy projects develop stronger political self-efficacy than those in a comparison group. Levy (2011b) also reported that students participating in Model United Nations showed considerable gains in both political interest and internal and external political efficacy. In terms of the processes by which such political efficacy develops, Beaumont (2010) has reported that political learning programs can best foster political efficacy via four main pathways: cultivate meaningful political challenges for skill building and political mastery, provide relatable role models who are politically efficacious themselves, foster supportive social networks and relationships and impart messages of “balanced optimism” to adopt resilient and empowering political attitudes.

### *Fostering Civic Character in School*

Civic character education seeks to foster the civic knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for engaged citizenship (Verba et al., 1995). Civic knowledge has traditionally been the domain of required high school civics course, and participation in such courses is related to a rise in civic participation (Galston, 2001) and presidential voting (Hart, Donnelly, Youniss & Atkins, 2007). Civic skills are those skills necessary for genuine civic involvement such as running a meeting, giving a speech and writing a letter or email about a civic issue. Verba, Schlozman and Brady’s (1995) theoretical framework for civic skills includes organization, communication, collective decision making and critical thinking. Finally, civic attitudes, or dispositions, refer to an ability to look beyond one’s self-interest to the greater good of one’s group or community (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont & Stephens, 2003; Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002). Such attitudes include a sense of oneself as a member of a larger social group and a belief that societal problems are the responsibility of both the community and the individual (Colby et al., 2003).

One pedagogical tool that can be used to foster civic character is to engage students in debate of controversial public issues. Hess (2002) defines controversial public issues (CPI) as “unresolved questions of public policy that spark significant disagreement”

(p. 189). According to numerous civic development scholars, exposure to different perspectives, while learning to grapple with opposing viewpoints, is an essential building block for responsible citizens and a democratic society (e.g. Kahne, Ullman & Middaugh, 2012; McLeod, Shah, Hess & Lee, 2010; Levinson, 2012b). Engaging students in these controversial conversations has been shown to expose students to more information than other commonly used instructional methods such as lectures, worksheets and films (Campbell, 2012a) and to result in greater civic knowledge and interest in politics (Hess, 2009).

Another classroom-based practice that has been found to strengthen social responsibility and commitment to political engagement is the establishment of “open classrooms.” An open classroom environment “fosters a free, open, and respectful exchange of ideas” (Campbell, 2008, p. 450) and is one in which “students feel comfortable and supported taking on controversial points of view and listening to others’ perspectives” (Levinson, 2012b, p. 97). Open classrooms have been shown to be an effective lever for fostering a sense of trust and equal membership between students and teachers (Campbell, 2008; Levinson, 2012a) and are conducive to the development of social responsibility in participating students (Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill & Galloway, 2007; Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011).

Students who participated in open classrooms had higher scores on civic knowledge tests and had a greater appreciation for conflict than students from more restricted classrooms (Youniss, 2012). Importantly, the degree of openness of a classroom environment is a stronger contributor to these outcomes than simply the number of civics courses taken (Youniss, 2012, p. 123).

Finally, classrooms that incorporate experiential and action-oriented learning have also been found to strengthen participating students’ sense of social responsibility and commitment to political engagement (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda & Yee, 2000; Flanagan & Christens, 2011; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Galston, 2001). Specifically, researchers have found that students who are exposed directly to issues of inequality and injustice, and who are given the opportunity to address these matters through experiential learning, are more likely to show concern for social issues, confront preconceived notions, develop an efficacious identity and be inspired to take action (e.g. Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; Levinson 2012a; Metz, McLellan & Youniss, 2003). Experiential learning (such as project-based learning, simulations, role-plays and service-learning projects) has been shown to result in increased understanding, acceptance and tolerance of social, racial and political differences (e.g. Avery, 1989; Avery, Sullivan & Wood, 1997; Kahne et al., 2012).

Unfortunately, researchers have found that the civic pedagogical practices discussed in the preceding paragraphs do not receive equal emphasis across all school settings (e.g. Campbell, 2008, 2012b; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Levinson, 2012b; McLeod, Shah, Hess & Lee, 2010; Spring, Dietz & Grimm, 2007). Students from low-SES and historically oppressed racial groups are less likely to report being exposed to open classroom environments (Levinson, 2012a), to partake in service learning or school-based service (Spring, Dietz & Grimm, 2007), to study the constitution or to participate in mock trials or role playing (Flanagan and Levine, 2010). Levinson (2012a) has characterized this pattern of denying such youth access to the most effective civic education practices as leading to a “civic empowerment gap” that is as pernicious and damaging to these students as the much-publicized academic achievement gap between privileged and disadvantaged students in the United States.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have parsed character development and character education into three dimensions—moral, performance and civic—with the goal of offering insight into the relationships between different types of character and student success, as well as research-based practices through which educators can foster these various types of character in youth and adolescents. As noted in the chapter introduction, we believe that making use of these character types allows for a more coherent review of the extant research literature on a diverse set of character strengths ranging from integrity to perseverance to social responsibility. That said, we also believe it is ultimately crucial for educators committed to the positive development of the youth with whom they work to recognize the interconnectedness of these various character strengths as well. As scholars such as Lickona and Davidson (2005) have pointed out, the possession of moral character strengths such as empathy or civic character strengths such as political engagement must ultimately be paired with perseverance and other performance character strengths in order for that empathy or engagement to be directed toward useful or effective ends. In short, then, despite having parsed moral, performance and civic character strengths in this chapter for the sake of clarity, we are hopeful that educators drawing upon this chapter as a resource will ultimately merge these character strengths back together again in their work to foster the academic and social development of the youth they serve.

This call for educators to deftly intertwine moral, performance and civic character development in their work with youth also points to an important direction for character education scholarship. As noted in the chapter introduction, for too many years research on character development and character education was hampered by different scholars invoking these terms in entirely different ways from one another. For this reason, the work over the past decade by various scholars to clarify the focus of their work on moral character *or* performance character *or* civic character has been important to helping the entire field move forward. The downside to such segmentation of character development research, of course, is that scholars are then unable to offer research-based practices to educators about *how* to engage in the deft intertwining of these dimensions of character that are ultimately necessary for positive youth development. In the years ahead, then, we foresee educators calling for, and scholars responding with, research into attributes and practices that simultaneously seek to cultivate multiple dimensions of students' character.

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