

CULTIVATING NOBLE PURPOSE IN URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOLS: A MISSING PIECE IN SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION

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In urban schools overwhelmed by increasing demands to raise test scores, exclusive focus on increasing academic competencies has proven ineffective. School-wide, comprehensive social-emotional and character development (SECD), focused on the cultivation of Noble Purpose, provides an alternative pathway toward life, college, and career success. We illustrate an SECD approach to cultivating Noble Purpose by describing the development of the MOSAIC (Mastering Our Skills and Inspiring Character) approach. The MOSAIC approach is grounded in the theory that social-emotional skills and character virtues must be explicitly taught in tandem. MOSAIC is unique in its focus on building Noble Purpose, a character virtue that we argue is missing in SECD approaches for middle school youth. In urban schools plagued by institutional and structural inequities and challenges, the MOSAIC content and structure provides an alternative route to closing achievement gaps, while preparing urban middle school youth for success in college, career, and life.

Keywords: Social-emotional learning (SEL), character development, social-emotional and character development (SECD), purpose, middle school

Given the high levels of political, racial, and social tensions facing the United States, students, more than ever, require explicit instruction in both character development and social-emotional learning (SEL) if they are to have academic and life success (Elias, 2009; Pace, 2016; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). For racial and ethnic minority students who live in poverty and attend under-resourced and low-performing urban schools, the need to develop these skills is especially urgent. Yet, schools are not systematically organized to accomplish this mission. Rather, they are structured as if competence in mathematics and the English language were

the guarantors of college or career success. In an article remarkably titled, "The Good News About Educational Equality," Reardon, Waldfogel, and Bassok (2016) document that continuing our current strategies will close the racial minority school readiness gap in 60-110 years. This does not strike us as good news. Building academic competencies may be necessary, but these competencies certainly are not sufficient, and our current approaches do not deserve endorsement (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2013).

There are alternative approaches to reducing the achievement gap that do not focus primarily on academic competencies. Two

independent lines of research have supported the positive effects of a systematic focus on character education and SEL on student outcomes (e.g., Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2003; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). There is a growing consensus in the literature that bringing together these historically separate disciplines would help students reach their full potential (Cohen, 2006; Elias, 2009; Seider, Gilbert, Novick, & Gomez, 2013). The effort to combine character development with social-emotional skill development is known as social-emotional and character development (SECD; Elias, 2009). Despite a growing acknowledgment of the importance of SECD, few school programs place equal emphasis on the development of character and SEL skills.

Typically, low-performing urban schools that are beset by demands to raise test scores simultaneously implement a host of separate programs, such as violence or substance abuse prevention initiatives, anti-bullying activities, SEL-based morning meetings, character education curricula, and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Despite sharing a common goal to increase positive youth development, these separate initiatives often have competing agendas and employ distinct, and sometimes proprietary, terminology to refer to the same concepts. Thus, it is rare for a single youth development program to fully account for “the formative role of emotion, the integrating role of character, and the actualizing role of skills” (p. 838, Elias, 2009). This phenomenon of uncoordinated prevention projects without a clear integration strategy or cohesive, long-term vision leads to a “jumbled schoolhouse” (Elias, Leverett, Duffell, Humphrey, Stepney, & Ferrito, 2015). In schools characterized by this jumble of prevention initiatives, it is common for programs to come and go frequently because there is no long-term sustainable vision connecting any specific program to the mission

of the school. Thus, it is not surprising that some believe precious school minutes spent on SECD and related approaches constitute a waste of time. In practice, SECD is currently implemented in ways almost guaranteed to not yield enduring benefits (Elias et al., 1997).

Trapped in a system placing ever more testing and program demands on failing schools, the complexity of the jumbled schoolhouse seems to only be growing, contributing not only to stress and frustration among school administrators and teachers, but also to dire consequences for students. Much like the individual student cannot thrive without integrated development of character and SEL skills, the school requires a cohesive constellation of programs and initiatives in order to flourish in the current, challenging climate (Elias, 1995; Elias et al., 2015). In response to the difficulties posed by the jumbled schoolhouse, we have developed an approach to social-emotional and character development driven by the cultivation of student “Noble Purpose.” The central focus on purpose provides the full school, as well as the individual student, a guiding principle around which to organize social, emotional, and academic growth. We call this approach Mastering Our Skills and Inspiring Character (MOSAIC). The MOSAIC approach to school-wide SECD has grown out of almost two decades of collaborative action-research in three urban school districts. In this paper, we document the evolution of this approach and describe its key components: integrated character and SEL, engaging pedagogical structures, and continuous feedback and refinement.

Developing the MOSAIC Approach to SECD

The journey to developing the current MOSAIC approach began as an initiative to create a comprehensive SECD model in a large urban middle school. The collaborative problem solving and lessons learned from

the pilot school were integral to setting the foundation for a school-wide SECD model in the context of resource-strapped urban middle schools.

Pilot School Characteristics

The pilot SECD curricular approach was developed over a three-year period in a large urban middle school in the mid-Atlantic United States (2012-2015). The student body of approximately 1300, on average, is made up of a predominately ethnic minority population (87% Hispanic and 11 % Black), and 94% of students who qualify for free (household income of 130% or below the federal poverty line) or reduced (household income of 185% or below federal poverty line) lunch. Like many schools of its size and demographic background, this middle school had excessively poor performance in academics and was beset by disciplinary problems, including excessive rates of detention and suspension, with 7805 disciplinary referrals in 2012-2013. The school was labeled a “Priority” school by the state, which signifies that the school was among the poorest academically performing schools in the state.

Intervention Description

A team of school personnel and collaborators from the research team created the first draft of the curriculum over the 2013-2014 school year, following a year of observation and trust-building. The pilot SECD curriculum was implemented during the school’s existing homeroom “advisory” period. Advisories at this school meet daily at the start of the school day for approximately 20 minutes, and nearly every staff member in a school leads an advisory. In the United States, advisories can be used for homework catch-up, announcements, and general academic and social support and adult-student relationship building. However, such time is often underutilized (McClure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2010).

The curriculum was built on the theory that social-emotional skills and character virtues must explicitly be taught in tandem. Students must use social-emotional skills to be able to act in accordance with their character virtues; thus, even the best character education program may be inadequate if it does not incorporate some form of explicit SEL skill-building into its framework (Elias, 2009). This concept is related to what character educators refer to as the interdependence of moral and performance character (Baehr, 2013; Berkowitz & Puka, 2009; Seider et al., 2013). Virtues are derived from, and are expressions of, an intrinsic good. Performance character, on the other hand, is not a virtue in itself, but it is an enabler of character—for good or ill (Baehr, 2013). The pilot curriculum included lessons about character virtues that were connected to monthly themes. The virtues that were selected were based on their connection to holidays or school events and were not necessarily linked to an overarching theoretical structure.

Social-emotional competencies have long been recognized as important for personal growth and effective performance in school, family, workplace, and civic contexts (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Elias et al., 1997). In a meta-analysis of 213 published studies of universal social-emotional learning interventions for children in preschool through 12th grade, Durlak et al. (2011) found statistically significant and meaningful improvements in social-emotional skills, socially appropriate behavior, positive attitudes, and academic performance. In line with the SEL literature, the pilot SECD curriculum emphasized achieving social, emotional, and behavioral competencies via interactive contexts, particularly the relationships between teachers and students and between students themselves. The specific SEL skills that were

highlighted were chosen for their connection to specific themes or activities selected by the curriculum development team.

In the pilot school, the approach to engaging the whole school in SECD also included a student-elected Ambassador component to enhance student voice. Ambassadors were elected in each advisory to lead on-going discussions about school improvement and engage in school improvement and leadership activities outside of the advisory class.

Action-Research Process

The action-research method is critical to the underlying tenets of collaboration and empowerment, both at the school and individual level. Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (2001) explain that action research, “seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities” (p. 1). This collaborative model was used to implement and refine the pilot SECD approach. Specifically, we recruited school staff to be involved with project implementation committees and provided research team in-school consultants to carry out the action-research methodology. Through these practices, school personnel and research team members became equal stakeholders in the refinement and success of the intervention. We found that the action-research process ultimately transformed the SECD approach such that the spirit of continuous refinement and improvement became embedded in the standard operating procedures. Teachers, curriculum writers, and students became accustomed to noticing successes and opportunities for improvement in both the SECD curriculum and the wider school.

School Staff as Intervention Leaders. In the pilot project, two school committees

were formed to support the intervention: the Ambassador Committee and the Advisory Curriculum Committee. Each committee was led by a school counselor or teacher and included teachers from each grade level as well as school social workers and counselors. Research team members collaborated with the committees to develop SECD curriculum materials, oversee teacher training and Ambassador training, and support implementation of lessons and integration of focal skills and virtues into non-advisory classes.

Research Team School Consultants.

A member of the research team was on-site during most school days to collaborate with the school committees, learn about the school’s climate, and act as a resource to advisory teachers. These in-school consultants played an integral role in understanding the climate and structure of the school and in building trust between the research team and school members.

Monthly Feedback Surveys. At the close of each curriculum unit, students and teachers reflected on the virtues and skills they learned over the past month and made suggestions for curriculum improvement. A committee made up of both school personnel and members of the research team was then responsible for collecting, summarizing, and responding to the student and teacher curriculum feedback. The feedback resulted in revisions to the curriculum and the development of new program components.

Classroom Visits. Members of the school committees and the research team consultants visited classrooms to provide strengths-based observations of program implementation (Ryan, Landicho, Linsky, Dembitzer, Cooper, & Elias, 2014). These observations were instrumental in promoting program implementation and fidelity through the documentation of successful implementation practices.

Pilot Project Outcomes

The pilot project resulted in three tangible outcomes, with a potential fourth on the way. First, school climate scores showed steady improvement over a three-year period, as perceived by staff and students (White, Hat-chimonji, & Elias, in preparation). Second, the school applied for and received a “Promising Practices Award” from the Character.org “Schools of Character” program. Third, the school was showcased on the award-winning “Classroom Close-up” television series. Fourth, the school is in the process of applying for both State and National “School of Character” status, which—if they are successful—will make the school the first “Priority” school (low-performing according to state standards) to achieve that status.

Successes from the Pilot Project

The action-research methodology allowed our team to identify specific successes and obstacles from the pilot project that informed the development of the current MOSAIC approach. Three successful components of the pilot project were the advisory structure, the implementation support structure, and the iterative refinement process.

Advisory Structure

Teachers initially found the daily 15-minute lesson structure to be a challenge due to competing demands eroding instructional time, such as administrative tasks, morning announcements, and school breakfast moving into the advisory classroom period. Through strengths-based classroom visits and student and teacher feedback reports, the research team documented procedures in classrooms that were implementing the program successfully. This process opened up conversations with the school administrators to identify potential adjustments to guarantee a full 15 minutes of instructional time. Adjustments

included moving the morning announcements and mandatory breakfast to the period after the advisory period. With fewer competing priorities and distractions, teachers and students in the pilot school were ultimately able to adjust to the 15-minute lesson format. Thus, the current MOSAIC approach maintains this 15-minute advisory structure to deliver the SECD curriculum.

The 15-minute advisory lesson structure is thought to be important for several reasons. First, the advisory structure obviates the need for schools to re-organize their schedules to make time for a new program. Further, the advisory structure is particularly important in “unjumbling” the schoolhouse because it necessarily involves the majority of the teachers in a school. This means that the entire school is able to develop a common understanding, language, and skill set toward building SECD throughout the day. Finally, it is likely that the daily SECD instruction offers an opportunity for distributed learning, which may increase skill-building over time (Son & Simon, 2012).

Implementation Support

The school committees formed in the pilot project served as essential components in the success of the program. Throughout the implementation of the pilot, the committee structures and procedures were adapted to meet the program needs. Initially committee members were uncertain of their roles in supporting the program implementation, which led to ineffective delegation of responsibilities and inefficient use of meeting time. An important innovation that clarified the committee role was a clear delineation of responsibilities on the committee. Each committee member was assigned a group of teachers for whom they were the point person. Through this system, teachers knew whom to approach with questions, which allowed issues to be readily identified and resources promptly allocated to the classrooms that needed them. Another

development through the pilot was a standard procedure for committee functioning. Agenda-setting before the meeting, note-taking during the meeting, and distribution of clear notes and action steps after the meeting helped to make committee sessions more efficient.

Because of the effectiveness of the school committees in supporting implementation during the pilot project, the current MOSAIC approach requires school administration to form an administrative support team and identify at least two faculty or staff members to serve as point people. These individuals are responsible for refining implementation in response to teacher and student feedback, training classroom teachers in implementing the SECD curriculum, and preparing and supporting the student Ambassadors for their roles as student leaders.

Iterative Refinement Process

The action-research model and the ongoing revisions that occurred during the pilot project in response to the monthly feedback process are now considered an essential component of the MOSAIC approach. Often schools and implementers suffer from "implementation fatigue," such that a once exciting program becomes dull and begins to be implemented with decreasing fidelity. To stave off this fatigue and optimize sustainability, both the original pilot project and the current MOSAIC approach incorporate regular reflection and feedback so that program revisions can be adopted to reflect the changing needs of the school environment, while also maintaining the integrity of the program's theoretical and empirically-based structure.

Noble Purpose: The Missing Piece

One of the most significant obstacles from the pilot project was repeated feedback from teachers that they had difficulty connecting the SECD lessons to college, career, and life success for their students. After examining the

curriculum, we noticed that in our attempt to be comprehensive, the pilot SECD curriculum included an assortment of character virtues and SEL skills that were not clearly linked to an overarching theory. The pilot curriculum operated from a more implicit framework whereby the teachers could focus on a variety of virtues or skills that fit within a particular lesson topic or activity. This implicit structure meant that there was no overarching framework to which all of the SECD lessons were connected, which placed the burden of connecting these virtues and skills to larger life goals on the SECD teachers. We considered the literature on character virtue development and social-emotional learning, reflected on previous successful school interventions in which our team had been involved, and determined that the missing piece in our school-wide SECD approach was Noble Purpose.

We had first considered the importance of cultivating Noble Purpose during seven years of work, from 1998-2005, with another urban district on district-wide essay contests about students' "Laws of Life." As students became more articulate about their own personal Laws of Life, or guiding principles, they became more actively conscious of, and motivated to obtain, the social-emotional skills needed to enact these Laws of Life. The district was convinced that this connection, and its subsequent supportive programming, created school turnarounds and meaningful academic improvements (Elias & Leverett, 2011). The student essays that came out of the Laws of Life project demonstrated the existence of powerful influences in urban communities communicating to students that they should expect failure and poor life outcomes for themselves. In these essays, we saw that students with a guiding life purpose were more likely to forge positive expectations for themselves and for their futures (Elias, Ogburn-Thompson, Lewis, & Neft, 2008). These positive future expectations

are now known in the literature as student self-expectations (Haynes, 2007), aspirations (Ou & Reynolds, 2008), or having a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006).

In our reconceptualization of a school-wide SECD approach for middle schools, we also considered the developmental needs of these students. Middle school marks the beginning of the critical developmental transition from childhood to adolescence. As middle school students' cognitive capabilities develop, they engage in both self-regulatory and motivational processes (Bouffard & Savitz-Romer, 2012). These cognitive changes make them more able to engage in reflection about their identity as well as their life-long goals, or purpose (Erikson, 1968; Malin, Reilly, Quinn, & Moran, 2013). At the same time that emerging adolescents are beginning to reflect on their own identity and purpose, they are also beginning to engage in increased risk-taking (Steinberg, 2008) and increased instances and severity of behavior transgressions (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). Because of these strengths and risks associated with the developmental milestones of transitioning to adolescence, middle school is the ideal time to focus an SECD intervention on the development of Noble Purpose.

Enhancing Noble Purpose

Purposeful youth have more positive academic and social outcomes than their less purposeful peers (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009; Damon, 2008; Hill, Edmonds, Peterson, Luyckx, & Andrews, 2016; Yeager & Bundick, 2009). Yet, many youth in disadvantaged, urban schools feel disempowered and lack opportunities to develop a positive purpose. The identities of youth in schools with a history of failure, in communities beset by disadvantage and social and economic disruption and where they see individuals more likely to be incarcerated than enrobed at college graduation, are unlikely to incorporate a

sense of Noble Purpose that would strengthen them to persevere in the face of adversity. Building on Damon and others' seminal work on the development of purpose in adolescence, we view developing a sense of purpose as integral to human identity and functioning, and therefore target this character virtue in the MOSAIC approach. Despite the accumulating evidence for the benefits of having a sense of purpose, there are no school-wide interventions in the research literature that explicitly address building purpose in youth (Koshy & Mariano, 2011).

The concept of a *Noble Purpose* is implicit in many formulations and discussions of purpose, but it is essential to be clear that it is possible to mobilize energy and learning in the service of purposes that are nefarious. Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003) distinguish between noble and ignoble purposes, noting that a Noble Purpose aims for promotion of humanity, whereas an ignoble purpose aims for its destruction. A glimpse at the front pages of newspapers around the world demonstrates the reality of ignoble purpose as a motivator of human behavior. A frequently cited definition of purpose is from Damon et al. (2003): "A stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self" (p. 121). In the MOSAIC approach, we follow the Damon et al. model of purpose that emphasizes an individual's motivation to impact the world beyond the self. We define Noble Purpose as a generalized intention to accomplish personally meaningful goals in service of a greater, non-destructive good that promotes human dignity and rights of all people.

Although Damon has pioneered research in developing youth purpose, the concept of developing purpose is not novel. Carl Jung was quoted by Damon (2003) as saying, "When goals go, meaning goes. When meaning goes, purpose goes. When purpose goes,

life goes dead in our hands” (p. 78). Jung implicitly recognized that purpose is part of a constellation of virtues and skills and that without purpose, life becomes directionless, inanimate animation. As a clinician, Jung saw many individuals whose life difficulties led them to engage in destructive purposes as the only way to keep themselves “alive.” And, like all clinicians, educators, clergy, and parents, Jung’s goal was not to change behavior but to change identity, to incorporate Noble Purpose, meaning, and sets of everyday goals and actions to reach them.

Perhaps no greater single indicator of the innate nature and power of purpose is the chronicle of Victor Frankl, who attributed survival within the Nazi concentration camps to being able to maintain a sense of positive, even communal, purpose. Sir John Templeton commented on this experience: “Their sense of an inner purpose pulled them through the most horrible physical and emotional experiences so that they might make their unique contribution to the world.” He added, “Every one of us has a purpose in life beyond our immediate interests and gratifications, though that purpose frequently goes undiscovered” (Templeton, 2012, p. 295). The connection to inner city, disadvantaged youth is clear. Students living in poverty often suffer physical and emotional indignities, many of which are unknown to the teachers and administrators who are charged with educating them. For these students, whose sense of Noble Purpose is not vigorously cultivated by school or community, it is possible that a sense of *ignoble* purpose is more likely to be cultivated. For this reason, the MOSAIC approach is designed to activate, build, and support Noble Purpose as well as associated positive, constructive attitudes and behaviors in youth at great risk of having their prosocial purpose go undiscovered.

A widening spectrum of research continues to reinforce the importance of Noble

Purpose to positive life outcomes. Bronk et al. (2009) found that having an identified purpose in life was associated with greater life satisfaction for adolescents, emerging adults, and adults. Adolescents who have identified a purpose appear to experience greater levels of positive affect and hope when compared to those who have not identified a purpose (Burrow, O’Dell, & Hill, 2010). In emerging adulthood, purpose has been shown to be positively associated with well-being and negatively associated with delinquency (Hill et al., 2016). In a cross-section of over 1,000 senior adults, Pillemer (2012) found that maintaining a positive purpose was one of the most frequently reported “Lessons for Living.” Using 14-year longitudinal data to track a broad population of adults, Hill and Turiano (2014) found that having a sense of purpose buffered against mortality risks and was linked to positive social relationships with others. It is clear from the increasing research that identifying and committing to a Noble Purpose is a key ingredient in creating a positive and productive life.

Constellation of Virtues Supporting Noble Purpose

Noble Purpose is critical to providing an overarching positive motivation to building identity and reaching goals. However, particularly among the most challenging schools, the actualization of Noble Purpose is complicated by students’ histories and contexts. These circumstances, and the lack of widespread, successful interventions, led us to reconceptualize the attainment of Noble Purpose to incorporate a constellation of supporting character virtues. Thus, the MOSAIC approach to cultivating Noble Purpose reflects recent work in understanding character development that suggests virtues cannot be developed in isolation (Snyder & Flay, 2012).

We have been influenced by the Davidson, Lickona, and Khmelkov (2014) identification

of converging characteristics for a flourishing life, which is what we refer to as a “constellation of virtues” supporting Noble Purpose. In their discussion of Safe and Good Schools, Davidson et al. (2014) describe eight strengths of character needed for flourishing, one of which involves crafting a life of Noble Purpose. The decision to employ a constellation of virtues supporting Noble Purpose was also influenced by the work of Narvaez and Bock (2014), who articulate a constellation of virtues approach that they call Triune-ethics theory. They identify three “ethics,” each comprising a number of virtues and character attributes, which converge to define individual identity: Safety, Engagement, and Imagination. They suggest that one’s sense of possibility, and, specifically, a positive, ethically-guided view of possibility, emerges from the intersection of safety and engagement with others.

The work of Narvaez and Bock (2014) and Davidson et al. (2014) is representative of the new way of thinking about the development of virtues that we have adopted in our model: single character virtues cannot be developed in isolation. Thus, in the MOSAIC approach, Noble Purpose is considered to be a superordinate virtue that provides impetus for student character and skill development by organizing short-term goals in pursuit of a larger goal (Han, 2015). In turn, Noble Purpose is developed by fostering five virtues that allow students to navigate their complex and difficult social contexts toward discovering their own Noble Purpose. The five virtues we have incorporated into the constellation of virtues supporting Noble Purpose were chosen through careful consideration to specifically meet the needs of an underserved, urban population.

Constellation of Virtues Defined

The specific virtues we have chosen to incorporate into the constellation of supporting virtues coincide with the focal virtues

identified consensually across cultures, contexts, and forms of investigation (Damon, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In order to develop Noble Purpose, we believe youth also need to develop diligence, generosity, future-mindedness, forgiveness, and creativity. These five supporting virtues are actionable within a school-based prevention framework and provide students with character development to help them cope with traumatic experiences and accumulating marginalization (Dutro & Bien, 2014). In accordance with the concept of Noble Purpose, we have modified the five MOSAIC virtues with adjectives that clarify the prosocial valence of each virtue.

Compassionate Forgiveness. Most critical to our student population, a group experiencing disproportionate life trauma, failure, negative role modeling, and disappointment, is the virtue of forgiveness. Developing forgiveness in these students is crucial so that they may learn to be future-minded and not past-constrained. As the work of Pennebaker (2007) and others has shown, the emotional weight of past trauma must be lifted if individuals are going to be able to move forward in their lives. Past work in disadvantaged and traumatized communities in the United States and Israel (particularly Arab populations) has demonstrated the importance of being able to use written and other forms of expression as vehicles for moving forward and breaking the emotional shackles of past and ongoing trauma (Dutro & Bien, 2014; Elias, 2008; Elias & Leverett, 2011; Kasler, White, & Elias, 2013).

In the MOSAIC approach, we consider forgiveness to be the capacity and tendency to overcome negative feelings in response to being harmed (Chiaromello, Mesnil, Muñoz Sastre, & Mullet, 2008; Lippman et al., 2014). We also include the concept of gratitude in our definition of forgiveness in that an individual who has the capacity to forgive others should also be able to experience gratitude. Including gratitude in our conception of forgiveness

captures the situational aspect (rather than interpersonal) of forgiveness. Building a capacity for gratitude may help students cope with ongoing situational stressors, including poverty and community violence. Teaching students to build a capacity for gratitude may also be uniquely valuable in increasing school engagement and student-teacher connectedness (Furlong, Froh, Muller, & Gonzalez, 2014).

Constructive Creativity. Directly related to students' need for forgiveness is their need for creativity. Creativity is essential for all students to thrive, but it is particularly important for students from disadvantaged circumstances. They must be helped to envision futures that differ from what is communicated to them directly and indirectly through mass and social media. Brookhart (2013) considers originality to be the central feature of creativity, in the context of assessing students' work products. But in our view, creativity is more than demonstrating originality in a work product. Creativity is a way of thinking, making connections, and approaching problem solving. In the MO-SAIC approach, the virtue of creativity is defined as the ability to recognize and seize non-obvious opportunity, engage in divergent thinking, and employ a problem solving orientation in challenging situations.

Responsible Diligence. Another crucial virtue for students in challenging environments is the perseverance of effort in the face of ongoing difficulties. In the MOSAIC approach, we define diligence as a combination of reliability and perseverance. In other words, a diligent student is able to both work hard for long periods of time and to be relied upon by others (Lippman et al., 2014). Research on grit suggests that perseverance is an important aspect of academic and other forms of achievement (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Duckworth, 2016). Because diligence is critical to setting and

achieving goals, it is an important virtue that supports the ability of a student to work towards their Noble Purpose.

Helpful Generosity. Generosity is an important virtue for students to develop if they are going to be able to act upon a Noble Purpose. Students who grow up in poverty may be accustomed to acting as the recipients of generosity from other individuals, so they may not believe that they themselves have something to offer. Because Noble Purpose assumes a generous orientation toward improving the greater community and world, it is critical that these students discover their own capacity for generosity. While Kasser (2005) defines generosity as "the extent to which individuals share their money and possessions" (p. 3), we see generosity more broadly. We define generosity as a component of prosocial behavior and civic engagement that involves sharing one's resources and the capacity to put others' needs before one's own, which are behaviors that are more widely studied in student populations. We see service, civic and school engagement, and contribution to society as the key mechanisms for enhancing generosity in the high-risk middle school population.

Optimistic Future-mindedness. Students' ability to think about and plan for the future is also essential to their development of Noble Purpose. Research on beliefs and perceptions about the future suggests that connecting current activities to future goals is associated with higher GPA, ratings of self-efficacy, and studying hours (Husman & Shell, 2008). In the MOSAIC approach, we define future-mindedness as having an aspirational, hopeful, and planful outlook on a positive future. Clearly, this ability to envision a positive future is critical for disadvantaged youth to be able to develop and commit to a Noble Purpose.

SEL Skills in the MOSAIC Approach

Similar to our decision to highlight a constellation of virtues linked to Noble Purpose, we chose to highlight four specific SEL skills in the MOSAIC approach. The four focal SEL skills taught in the MOSAIC curriculum are rooted in the cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies clusters identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2012). The MOSAIC lessons highlight communication, empathy, emotion regulation, and social problem solving. Recognizing the inherent interconnectedness of SEL skills, we have intentionally provided broad definitions of these focal skills. In this way, we aim to include the full spectrum of SEL skills and practices in MOSAIC. In the MOSAIC approach, we understand *communication* to encapsulate the act of listening to others as well as articulating one's own thoughts and feelings. *Emotion regulation* refers to identifying, understanding, regulating, and coping with one's feelings. We define *empathy* as understanding and caring about another person's experience and perspective. *Social problem solving* refers to both the individual and group process of thinking through a problem carefully and making a decision and a plan to resolve the issue, especially in the face of obstacles. In MOSAIC, these skills are taught both explicitly, naming the skills and teaching concrete ways to enact them, and through pedagogical structures and interactive contexts that call on students to use their SEL skills. In this way, MOSAIC progressively builds each student's capability to act in service of their Noble Purpose.

MOSAIC Curriculum Structure

In the current iteration of MOSAIC, the character virtues and SEL skills are brought together by monthly themes (Table 1). Thus, from the first day of implementation, teachers

and students alike have a clear understanding of the timeline and scope of material included in the MOSAIC curriculum. Additionally, the current version of the MOSAIC curriculum uses a standard monthly sequence of three week-long activities. The first activity introduces the monthly virtue and theme. The second activity teaches SEL skill-building in service of the monthly virtue and theme. The third activity is a school-community action series for school and community improvement. Each month concludes with a brief reflection and feedback. This repeated lesson sequence aids teachers in their ability to effectively facilitate the program.

Another critical innovation that resulted from the collaborative action-research process was the differentiation of the curriculum for 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students. The resulting sequence is a "developmental spiral," in which students encounter the same skills and virtues each year. The differentiation occurs by engaging the virtues and skills with increasing complexity. Specifically, in sixth grade, students are asked to apply the skills and virtues to their own self growth, in the seventh grade, the skills and virtues are applied outwardly to the student's own school, and by eighth grade, students are able to apply the skills and virtues to the outside world. In other words, with each year, students are asked to adapt their Noble Purpose in a deeper and more complex way to build a "better me," a "better school," and finally, a "better world."

Not only does the focus of the curriculum change with each year of the curriculum, but the curriculum also becomes less structured over the three-year sequence. Teachers in the pilot school often reported that material needed to be more concrete for sixth grade students and that eighth grade students were sometimes disengaged. Thus, in the current iteration of the MOSAIC curriculum, the sixth grade lessons include several specific and concrete examples for the skills and

virtues. Seventh grade lessons include much of the structure of the sixth grade lessons but include more opportunities for student input. Eighth grade lessons are much less structured than the sixth and seventh grade lessons, allowing eighth grade students to take greater ownership of their own social emotional and character development in preparation for the greater autonomy they will have in high school.

Action-Focused Pedagogy

The character virtues and SEL skills described above represent the revised content of the MOSAIC approach to SECD. In addition to these content revisions, we refined the pedagogical structures. These revisions stemmed from our fundamental belief that how a curriculum is taught is equally important to the content of the curriculum (Elias, 2004; Pasi, 2001). Whereas the character virtues and SEL skills selected to support Noble Purpose have

been highlighted based on the specific context of urban schools in the Northeastern United States, the use of an action-focused pedagogy is generalizable to any school setting.

Experiential Exercises

The most frequent piece of feedback from students in the pilot school was the need for lessons to be more interactive and connected to their lived experiences. For moral development to be nurtured, it must be cultivated in a scaled manner (Narvaez, 2005). Thus, experiential learning is used to foster student engagement with the SECD material. We draw from the suggestions of Narvaez and Bock (2014) who endorse creating a caring climate and teaching ethical skills intentionally and systematically by focusing on lived experience and immersion in real-life situations with guided practice. By providing examples of the focal virtues through multimedia forums, such as videos, audio stories, visual

Table 1. *MOSAIC Virtues and Skills by Month*

Month	Theme	Virtue	Skills
September	Why Are We Here? Finding Our Positive Purpose	Introduction to Positive Purpose	Communication & Social Problem Solving
October	What Kind of Person Do I Want to Be?	Overview of All Virtues	Overview of All Skills
November	Making Ourselves, School, and World Better	Constructive Creativity	Communication & Social Problem Solving
December	Giving Back to Our Selves, School, and World	Helpful Generosity	Communication & Social Problem Solving
January	Planning for the Future	Optimistic Future-Mindedness	Empathy & Social Problem Solving
February	Showing Resilience and Overcoming Obstacles	Responsible Diligence	Emotion Regulation & Social Problem Solving
March	Appreciating Ourselves, Our School, and Our World	Compassionate Gratitude	Communication & Empathy
April	Connecting with Others and Being a Leader	Compassionate Forgiveness	Emotion Regulation & Empathy
May	Looking Forward: Next Steps on the Journey	Positive Purpose	Communication & Social Problem Solving
June	Looking Back: What Have I Accomplished, What Have I Learned?	All Virtues Summary	All Skills Integrated

art, and poetry, students are asked to consider how each virtue is enacted in their lives. Through experiential activities, including debates and agree-disagree games, students are encouraged to take a position on a topic. These methods introduce students to monthly themes and virtues in a way that asks them to connect SECD to their lived experiences and personal beliefs.

Practice for Skill Generalization

Within the MOSAIC curriculum structure, teachers are encouraged to frequently review the focal virtues and skills and operate under the assumption that students will need to learn the material several times before it becomes something they are able to use. As is true in any empirically supported SECD curriculum, structures designed to support practice across time and settings, such as role-plays, action planning, and reflection, are included to optimize generalization. In MOSAIC, teachers are asked to anticipate the need for skills and virtues so that students have an opportunity to prepare themselves for practice. This learning is reinforced through ongoing visual reminders, termed "Throughline Sheets," posted in every classroom, encouraging staff and students alike to employ the focal skills and virtues in all subjects in coordination with lessons students are receiving (Elias, 2004).

Student-Led Service Discussions and Projects

To optimize learning and the development of critical consciousness, effective SECD lessons should include student-led discussions and service projects. We derive this from the growing literature on the essential roles of student voice and engagement in promoting internalized learning on the part of students, particularly of middle-school age (Larson, Shernoff, & Bempechat, 2014; Li, Agans, Chase, Arbeit, Weinder, & Lerner, 2015; Voight, 2015). This aspect of action-focused

pedagogy involves students in meaningful discussions and service projects about areas of their concern.

In the pilot school, classroom discussions about school improvement were carried out by the student-elected Ambassadors. These discussions led to meaningful changes, such as healthier school lunch options and more school dances and "dress-down" days to celebrate student successes. However, there were several challenges in the Ambassador Program, including Ambassadors not feeling prepared for their role because of the limited opportunities for training both teachers and Ambassadors. In addition, because teachers and administrators became eager to invest in the Ambassador Program, Ambassadors began to enjoy disproportionate benefits to the work they were expected to do. For example, Ambassadors were repeatedly able to have a special lunch and be excused from class, while only being expected to lead one classroom discussion per week. Although it was beneficial that the Ambassador role became desirable, the responsibility and work requirements asked of the Ambassadors did not correspond to the benefits they received, thus detracting from the integrity of the program.

The current Ambassador Program has been adapted to link the Ambassador role inside the MOSAIC classroom more explicitly to the Ambassador role in the greater school community. Currently, inside the MOSAIC classroom, Ambassador-led discussions occur monthly over the course of one week. Outside of the MOSAIC classroom, Ambassador activities and service project teams build on the classroom discussions and put student ideas into practice. As a part of these service project teams, Ambassadors work on Positive Purpose Projects to improve their school and community. Through these projects, the Ambassadors play a crucial role in linking MOSAIC classroom discussions to the broader school community. In the revised approach,

Ambassadors receive fewer benefits than they received in the pilot school, with the most rewarding benefit of an “Ambassador Showcase Day” occurring at the end of the school year, after the Ambassadors have completed their Positive Purpose Projects. As changes that result from the Ambassador discussions and service projects are put into place, all students discover the positive impact their ideas and efforts can have on shaping their community.

The ultimate goal of the action-focused pedagogy is to create purposeful experiences that will stimulate creativity and possibility and build the related virtues and social-emotional skills that provide conditions under which Noble Purpose is more likely to thrive. These pedagogical tools are designed to increase student school engagement and critical consciousness, two constructs that contribute to educational and occupational achievement (Appleton et al., 2008; Diemer, 2009; Diemer & Hsieh, 2008; Diemer, Hsieh, & Pan, 2009). Through an iterative process of discussion, problem solving, and action, action-focused pedagogy asks both students and teachers to apply focal skills and virtues to their specific context. These flexible processes allow adaptation of MOSAIC for the needs of any school that chooses to engage it, including modifying the focal virtues and skills serving the Noble

Purposes in their own communities. From the perspective of middle school, using an SECD approach with action-focused pedagogy becomes a school-wide process of valuing the contributions of all community members and working together to create a better self, better school and community, and, ultimately, a better world.

Conclusion

The 2015-2016 school year marked the first year of implementation of the MOSAIC approach in six urban middle schools. We believe that the MOSAIC approach, through its innovative integration of character and skill development, action-focused pedagogy, and structures and procedures informed by the lessons learned from pilot work, paves the way for the future of character and SEL education. In particular, for urban, middle school youth in schools beset by institutional and structural inequities and challenges, the program content and structure provides an alternative perspective to closing achievement gaps while preparing these students for success in college, career, and life. We look forward to sharing outcomes from both the pilot study and the current iteration of MOSAIC, as well as sharing our program materials for widespread dissemination.

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