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Developing Noble Purpose in Middle School Students through Character Development and Social-Emotional Learning

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Abstract

Our belief is that virtues must not only be learned but also applied for good. Therefore, our team has designed a virtue education program, Mastering Our Skills and Inspiring Character (MOSAIC), integrating character education and social-emotional learning methodology. This synthesized approach will use action pedagogy to teach youth both a constellation of character virtues and the skills to cultivate these virtues toward their own, unique noble purpose. In the 3-year implementation of the MOSAIC approach in 6 urban schools in New Jersey, starting in September 2015 and funded by the Templeton Foundation, we will evaluate the efficacy of this combined methodology. Our paper discusses: (1) the structure and pedagogy of the MOSAIC project, (2) implementation findings from the use of an initial version of the curriculum at another urban middle school in New Jersey in 2013-2015, and (3) the strategy and components of the 3-year MOSAIC project implementation plan.

The MOSAIC curriculum uses social-emotional and character education techniques to increase student skills for developing and acting on noble purpose within the context of already-existing middle school advisory classes. The virtues we incorporate are compassionate forgiveness and gratitude, constructive creativity, helpful generosity, responsible diligence, and optimistic future-mindedness. Through pedagogical methods including conversation series and debates, student- and teacher-led discussions focusing on relevant issues in the school, service-linked projects, and reflection activities, the MOSAIC program teaches students to use their social and emotional skills to develop their own virtue-driven noble purpose. This learning is reinforced through ongoing, coordinated visual reminders, termed “Throughline Sheets”, posted in every classroom, encouraging staff and students alike to employ their MOSAIC skills and virtues in all subjects.

Developing Noble Purpose in Middle School Students through Character Development and Social-Emotional Learning

Introduction

Students require explicit instruction in both character education and social-emotional learning (SEL) skill development if they are to have academic and life success (Elias, 2009; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Two independent lines of research have supported the positive effects of character education and SEL programming on student outcomes (e.g., Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2003; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). However, there is a growing consensus in the literature that character and virtue development must operate in conjunction with skill development to help children reach their full potential. The combined effort of character education and SEL skill development is known as social-emotional and character development (SECD).

Despite a growing acknowledgment of the importance of SECD, few school programs place equal emphasis on the development of character and SEL skills. More typically, schools simultaneously implement separate programs, such as violence prevention initiatives, SEL-based morning meetings, character education curricula, and Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Despite sharing a goal to increase positive youth development, these separate initiatives can have competing agendas and often employ distinct terminology to refer to the same concepts. Thus, it is rare for a youth development program to fully account for the “the formative role of emotion, the integrating role of character, and the actualizing role of skills” (p. 838, Elias, 2009). This phenomenon of uncoordinated, short-term prevention projects leads to a “jumbled schoolhouse,” without a clear integration strategy or cohesive, long-term vision. 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 staff, 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, Leverett, Duffell, Humphrey, Stepney, & Ferrito, 2015).

Our team has developed an integrated SECD program to build Noble Purpose in middle school youth: Mastering Our Skills and Inspiring Character (MOSAIC). The MOSAIC approach is now being refined and tested in six schools, as part of a research project funded by the Templeton Foundation. MOSAIC is a culmination of two years of action-research and curriculum development within a disadvantaged urban middle school. The resulting curriculum is not only innovative for its integration of character virtues and skills, but it is also unique in its ability to connect disparate school structures and “unjumble” the jumbled schoolhouse by promoting MOSAIC-specific language and pedagogy throughout the school day. Further, the iterative reflection, feedback, and revision process that has led to the current structure of the MOSAIC approach is, in fact, an integral component of the program. Incorporating continuous feedback and program refinement into MOSAIC optimizes the program’s sustainability and its potential to be generalized to additional school contexts.

Theoretical Background of MOSAIC

Enhancing Noble Purpose

The overarching focus of the MOSAIC approach is to develop of a sense of Noble Purpose in disadvantaged, at-risk minority youth. Purposeful youth have more positive academic and social outcomes than their less purposeful peers (Damon, 2008). Yet, many youth in

disadvantaged, urban schools feel disempowered and lack opportunities to develop a positive purpose. For youth in schools with a history of failure, in communities beset by disadvantage and social and economic disruption, where they see individuals more likely to be incarcerated than enrobed at college graduation, their identities are unlikely to incorporate a sense of Noble Purpose and make commitments to their own health and academic well-being, or to persevere in the face of adversity. Building on Damon and others' seminal work, we view developing a sense of purpose as integral to human identity and functioning. However, to focus on healthy outcomes—in this case, Noble Purpose—is a more complicated matter, especially when one's life circumstances make attaining a Noble Purpose unclear, distant, and/or unlikely, and less healthy and sometimes unrealistic purposes seem more inviting and approachable.

The concept of a *Noble Purpose* is implicit in many formulations and discussions of purpose, but we believe it is essential to be clear that it is quite possible to mobilize one's 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. One need only look at the front pages of newspapers around the world to appreciate 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). We define Noble Purpose as a generalized intention to accomplish personally meaningful goals in service of a greater, non-destructive good and promoting human dignity and rights.

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 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 maintaining a sense of positive, even communal, purpose with survival of the Nazi concentration camps. As Sir John Templeton commented, “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. 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 analogy to inner city disadvantaged youth should be clear. These are students who also suffer many physical and emotional indignities and affronts, and whose sense of Noble Purpose is not vigorously cultivated by school or community. Indeed, it may be said that a sense of *ignoble* purpose is more apt to be cultivated. For this reason, MOSAIC is directly designed to activate, build, and support Noble Purpose and associated productive, positive, constructive attitudes and behaviors in youth at great risk of being misdirected or lost.

A widening spectrum of research continues to reinforce the importance of Noble Purpose. A major study by Hill and Turiano (2014) using 14-year longitudinal data tracking a broad population of adults found that having a sense of purpose buffered against mortality risks and was linked to positive social relationships with others. Karl Pillemer (2012) asked a cross-

section of over 1,000 senior adults to look back on their lives and reflect on their “30 Lessons for Living.” Among the most prominent was to maintain a sense of positive purpose. In many instances, that purpose was linked to ensuring the well-being of their children and grandchildren. But most often, it was connected to a concern for others, looking into the future with enthusiasm, and staying active and constructively goal-directed. We find that Pillemer’s work is highly consistent with the constellation of virtues in support of purpose that we derive from a more youth-oriented literature.

Oyserman, Smith, and Elmore’s (2014) theory of identity motivation states that students’ accessible identities are highly influential in determining what they view as attainable short- and long-term futures and their willingness to act toward these futures. Oyserman et al. (2014) also note that individuals within challenging circumstances do find their way to positive identities, and schools can play a central role in helping students discover a sense of Noble Purpose. This is most likely to happen in a supportive culture and climate, with programming that allows exploration of possibilities and the building of skills to attain those possibilities. Hence, middle school advisories focused on life, college, and career success and the virtues and social-emotional skills needed for that success represents an intervention of considerable potential impact.

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 and populations, 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 virtues. Thus,

we incorporate a constellation of supporting virtues into MOSAIC to reflect recent advances in understanding youth development that suggest virtues cannot be developed in isolation (Snyder & Flay, 2012).

Our decision to incorporate a constellation of virtues to support Noble Purpose has precedence in the character education literature. As an example, consider Davidson, Lickona, and Khmelkov's (2014) discussion of Safe and Good Schools. They describe eight strengths of character needed for a flourishing life: 1) lifelong learner and critical thinker, 2) diligent and capable performer, 3) social and emotionally skilled person, 4) ethical individual, 5) respectful and responsible moral agent, 6) self-disciplined person who pursues a healthy lifestyle, 7) contributing community member and democratic citizen, and 8) spiritual person crafting a life of noble purpose. Our approach to MOSAIC has been influenced by the Davidson et al. (2014) identification of converging characteristics for a flourishing life, which is what we refer to as a "constellation of virtues."

In addition, the presentation of Davidson et al. (2014) points to the need to focus on Noble Purpose as a superordinate virtue. While Noble Purpose is number eight on their list, it is the one dimension that provides clear, positive directionality to human effort, energy, learning, and accomplishment. Social-emotional skills, while essential, can be mobilized in the service of many purposes. Being diligent does not automatically mean doing so for a positive outcome. Indeed, we have seen students who apply a high degree of diligence to disrupt classroom lessons and victimize classmates. When Davidson et al. (2014) amend self-discipline to link it to pursuit of health and contribution to community toward fostering democracy, they are explicitly integrating Noble Purpose-related directionality to what they see as strengths worth developing.

Narvaez and Bock (2014) also articulate a constellation of virtues approach, which 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. One’s sense of possibility, and, specifically, a positively ethically guided possibility, emerges from the intersection of safety (largely emotion/survival) and engagement (present interactive experience, balance of calm, distress, and empathic interaction in one’s life). They speak of the need for schools to create a caring climate and to teach ethical skills intentionally and systematically, focusing on lived experience, immersion in real-life situations with guided practice (Narvaez & Bock, 2014).

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 program model. The constellation of virtues we have incorporated into MOSAIC are explicated below.

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). We believe youth also need to develop diligence, generosity, future-mindedness, forgiveness, and creativity. These five supporting values 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 population of at-risk young people—a group experiencing disproportionate life trauma, failure, negative role modeling, and

disappointment— is the emotional skill 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 have shown, the emotional weight of past trauma must be lifted if individuals are going to be able to move forward in their lives. A key premise of our successful Laws of Life work in disadvantaged and traumatized communities in the United States and Israel (particularly Arab populations) was the importance of being able to use written and other expressions of Laws of Life as vehicles for moving forward and breaking the emotional shackles of past, and even ongoing, trauma (Dutro & Bien, 2014; Elias, 2008; Elias & Leverett, 2011; Kasler, White, & Elias, 2013).

Forgiveness has been defined as, “forswearing of negative affect and judgment by viewing the wrongdoer with compassion and love, in the face of a wrongdoer’s considerable injustice” (Enright, 1991, p. 123). For this research project, we consider forgiveness to be the capacity and tendency to overcome negative feelings in response to being harmed (Chiaromello et al., 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 should also be able to experience gratitude. Including gratitude in our conception of forgiveness allows us to capture the element of situational (rather than interpersonal) forgiveness.

Constructive Creativity. Directly related to students’ need for forgiveness is their need for creativity. Creativity is essential for children to thrive, particularly for children from disadvantaged circumstances. They must be helped to develop the ability to see alternative futures from those around them, from those of their parents and other relatives, and from what is communicated to them directly and indirectly, including mass and social media. Sir John Templeton believed that we have the capacity to use greater resources in our own minds if we

can create the conditions for this to happen more regularly (Herrmann, 2004). 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 an orientation to problem solving. In the MOSAIC approach, creativity is defined as the ability to recognize and seize non-obvious opportunity, divergent thinking, and a problem solving orientation in challenging interpersonal situations. Defined this way, creativity is crucial in everyday life contexts as well as business and spiritual concerns.

Responsible Diligence. Another crucial virtue for students in challenging environments is the perseverance of effort in the face of ongoing difficulties. For the purpose of this study, we define diligence as a combination of reliability and perseverance. In other words, a diligent student is able both to work hard for long periods of time and to be relied upon by others. Diligence is related to the Big Five trait of Conscientiousness, but recent research on “grit” suggests that some aspects of perseverance may not be included in the Conscientiousness trait (Duckworth et al., 2007; Lippman et al., 2014).

Helpful Generosity. Generosity is an important virtue for students to develop if they are going to be able to act upon a Noble Purpose. 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, higher ratings of self-efficacy and higher studying hours and higher primary contingency beliefs (Husman & Shell, 2008). For the purposes of this study, we define future mindedness as having an aspirational, hopeful, and planful outlook on a positive future. Clearly, this is a particular need for disadvantaged youth.

Integrating Social-emotional Skills

Elias (2009) has suggested that 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 SEL skill-building into its framework. In the character education literature, this concept is known as the interdependence of moral and performance character. Jason Baehr, while making a case for intellectual virtues within character education, clarifies that skills are essential for enacting virtues. Virtues are derived from, and are expressions of, an intrinsic good. Performance character is not a virtue in itself, but an enabler of character—for good or ill. As Baehr (2013) notes:

Performance character, by contrast, is best understood in procedural terms—in terms of how one pursues a particular goal, and, in particular, of how one proceeds in the face various challenges or obstacles to the achievement of a goal. As such it cuts across the different dimensions just noted. Strong performance character is needed in academic and other intellectual pursuits. It is also needed in civic and moral pursuits: the bumbling or akratic moral or civic agent is hardly virtuous. (p. 7)

Holding virtues but never putting them into action is limiting. Noble Purpose that is not other-

directed ultimately will not be very noble. Being other-directed requires skills to operate in many contexts, particularly in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world where education—college, at least—is quickly becoming a minimal criterion for flourishing. So many at-risk young people who are able to get to college ultimately drop out, not for lack of intelligence, but for lack of social-emotional competencies and a clear sense of Noble Purpose to sustain them through challenges and obstacles (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2013).

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, Zins, et al., 1997). In a recent 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. Additionally, statistically significant decreases were found in conduct problems and emotional distress. In line with the SEL literature, the MOSAIC approach places great emphasis on achieving social, emotional, and behavioral competencies via interactive contexts, particularly the relationships between teachers and students and between students themselves.

The four focal skills taught in 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 into the MOSAIC program. In

MOSAIC, 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 and intrinsically, through pedagogical structures and interactive contexts, to build each student's capability to act in service of their Noble Purpose.

Action-Focused Pedagogy

Whereas the virtues and skills highlighted in MOSAIC have been selected based on the specific context of urban schools in the Northeastern United States, the action-focused pedagogy of MOSAIC is thought to be generalizable to any school setting. Through the iterative process of discussion, problem solving, and action, MOSAIC asks students and teachers alike to apply the skills and virtues that they are learning to their specific context. These flexible processes allow the MOSAIC approach to be adapted for the needs of any school that chooses to engage it. Thus, MOSAIC is not only a character education curriculum, but it is also a school-wide process of valuing the contributions of all community members and working together to become a better self, better school, and ultimately a better world.

Tenets of the action-focused pedagogy include engaging activities for optimized learning and skill generalization outside of the SECD-specific curriculum and the development of critical consciousness through student-led discussions and service projects. Through these pedagogical tools, we believe that student school engagement and critical consciousness will increase through the MOSAIC intervention, two constructs that have been demonstrated to contribute to

educational and occupational achievement (Appleton et al., 2008; Diemer, 2009; Diemer & Hsieh, 2008; Diemer, Hsieh, & Pan, 2009).

The MOSAIC approach utilizes experiential learning and repeated practice techniques to elicit student engagement with, and comprehension of, the material both in and outside of MOSAIC lessons. Through experiential activities, such as videos, and debates that encourage taking a position on a topic, students are introduced to monthly themes in a way that asks students to connect MOSAIC to their lived experiences. Throughout the MOSAIC curriculum, teachers are encouraged to frequently review the focal MOSAIC 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. To optimize performance character and skill generalization, MOSAIC includes structures designed to support practice across time and settings, such as role-plays, action planning, and reflection. 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 their MOSAIC skills and virtues in all subjects in coordination with lessons students are receiving (Elias, 2004).

The culmination of the action-focused pedagogy is the engagement of students in meaningful discussions and service projects about areas of their concern. This takes the form of a monthly discussion series about school improvement led by student-elected Ambassadors. Each advisory elects two student Ambassadors who have the responsibility of soliciting feedback and suggestions for school improvement from their classmates. These student leaders facilitate a monthly School-Community Action (SCA) Series in each advisory. Classroom consensual feedback is then brought to a designated individual or group within the school, and feedback and

action steps are brought back to the MOSAIC classroom. Additionally, later in the year, students use the SCA series to determine a class service project to improve an issue in their school, community, or the world. Thus, an important element of change is what happens outside of the advisory period. As changes that result from the Ambassador feedback and class service projects are put into place, students discover the positive impact their ideas and efforts can have on shaping their community.

Ultimately, the goal of the MOSAIC approach 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. This constellation of virtues undergirded our successes in Laws of Life interventions in the past (Elias, Ogburn-Thompson, Lewis, & Neft, 2008), and we believe these virtues must be built explicitly into MOSAIC for college, career, and contribution success.

Pilot Study

Pilot School Characteristics

MOSAIC was developed and piloted over a two-year period in a large urban middle school in the mid-Atlantic United States (2013-2015). In the 2013-14 school year, this middle school enrolled approximately 1200 students. The student body is made up of a majority ethnic minority (87% Hispanic and 11 % Black), and 94% of students in the school qualified 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.

Intervention Description

The pilot version of MOSAIC was implemented during an existing homeroom “advisory” period. Advisories at this school meet daily at the start of the school day, 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, but such time is often underutilized (McClure et al., 2010).

Action-Research Process

The action-research method utilized in this project is critical to the underlying tenets of collaboration and empowerment both at the school and individual level. Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury 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” (2001, p. 1). This collaborative model was used during the two-year pilot program. Specifically, the recruitment of school staff to project implementation committees, involvement of research team in-school consultants, and implementation and fidelity measures provided the structures necessary to carry out the action-research methodology. Through these practices, school members and the research team became equal stakeholders in the success of the program.

School Staff as Intervention Leaders. In the pilot school, two school committees were formed to support the project: the Ambassador Committee and the Advisory Curriculum Committee. Each committee was led by a school counselor or teacher, and included teachers and counselors from each grade level. Rutgers SEL Lab Research Team members collaborated with the committees to oversee teacher training, Ambassador training, implementation of lessons, and

integration of the skills and virtues into non-Advisory classes.

Research Team School Consultants. A member of the Rutgers SEL Lab Research Team was on-site during most school days to collaborate with the school committees, learn about the school climate, and act as a resource to advisory teachers. These 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 paused to reflect on the virtues and skills they learned over the past month and to make suggestions for how the curriculum can be improved. A committee made up of school personnel was then responsible for collecting, summarizing, and responding to this feedback. The feedback could result 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).

Iterative Refinement Process. The program revisions that occurred over the course of the pilot are, in fact, considered an on-going part 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, the MOSAIC curriculum incorporates monthly reflection and feedback that allows the program to develop with the changing needs of the school environment.

Lessons Learned from Pilot Study

Advisory Structure

Teachers initially found the daily 15-minute lesson period to be a challenge due to competing priorities, such as administrative tasks, morning announcements, and school breakfast moving into the advisory classroom. Through strengths-based classroom visits and student and teacher feedback reports, our team documented procedures in classrooms that were implementing the program successfully. This allowed our team to work in conjunction with the school to identify the key adjustments needed to guarantee a full 15 minutes of instructional time. Adjustments included moving announcements and breakfast to second period.

Curriculum Content

Through our multiple feedback methods, teachers repeatedly indicated that it was difficult to connect the pilot lessons to college, career, and life success. In addition, teachers reported difficulty in understanding how to effectively activate and integrate the content from the MOSAIC advisory lesson into the rest of the school day. The most frequent piece of feedback from students was the need for lessons to be more interactive and connected to their lived experiences.

Ambassador Program Component

In our pilot, the Ambassador-Led discussions led to meaningful changes, such as healthier school lunch options and more school dances and “dress-down” days to celebrate student successes. Ambassadors also engaged in trainings outside of the MOSAIC classroom that focused on leadership skills and civic engagement for school improvement. Challenges in the Ambassador Program included Ambassadors not feeling prepared for their role due to difficulties with teacher training and Ambassador training. In addition, we found that the Ambassadors enjoyed disproportionate benefits, such as getting to have a special lunch, getting out of class, and the status associated with the title of Ambassador. Although it was beneficial

that the Ambassador role became desirable, the responsibility and work requirements asked of the Ambassadors did not correlate to the amount of rewards they received, thus detracting from the integrity of the program.

School Committees

The school advisory and ambassador committees formed in the pilot study 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.

The Current MOSAIC Project

Effective Practices Replicated from Pilot Study

Advisory Structure. Results from the pilot suggested that the advisory model was both feasible and effective. Thus, the timing and structure of advisories was maintained in the current MOSAIC structure. 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 the daily SECD instruction offers an opportunity for distributed learning, which may increase skill-building over time (Son & Simon, 2012).

School Committees. The sustainability of the MOSAIC program depends on the school’s ability to support implementation by engaging in active problem solving. Because of the effectiveness of the School Committees in supporting implementation during the pilot program, the MOSAIC program requires that a school appoint a committee to oversee the implementation of MOSAIC. At a minimum, the committee includes one teacher from each (6, 7, 8) grade level, a school counselor, and the Student Council advisor. The committee is responsible for refining implementation in response to monthly teacher and student feedback. The committee also plays a role in training classroom teachers in implementing MOSAIC and preparing and supporting the student Ambassadors for their roles as student leaders.

Project Adaptations from Pilot Study

Curriculum. Based on the teacher feedback from the pilot study, the MOSAIC program was revised to include a clearer articulation of the skills and virtues embedded in the program. In the current iteration of MOSAIC, monthly themes are connected to specific virtues and skills (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 curriculum. Additionally, the current version of the MOSAIC curriculum utilizes a standard monthly sequence of four, 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 the school-community action series. The final activity provides student and teachers opportunity to reflect on the month's lessons and provide feedback. This repeated lesson sequence aids teachers in their ability to effectively facilitate the program.

Engaging and Developmentally Appropriate Pedagogy. 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 in skills with increasingly 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.”

Activating MOSAIC Throughout the School Day. The “Throughline Sheet” was an additional innovation derived from the action-research process. This tool was developed to support the integration of MOSAIC skills, virtues, and themes into classrooms and structures outside of the MOSAIC classroom. Each month, a new Throughline Sheet is distributed and posted in every classroom in which the MOSAIC curriculum is taught, prompting both teachers and students to activate the skills and virtues they are learning in their current MOSAIC class to all of their classes.

In addition to the Throughline innovation, the 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, Ambassador-led discussions occur monthly over the course of one week, rather than weekly on Fridays. This change is intended to provide continuity to the discussions. Ambassador activities and service project teams are directly connected to the school community action series discussions. Thus, in the revised approach, the Ambassadors play an even more crucial role in activating MOSAIC throughout the school day.

Conclusion

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 the two-year pilot project, will pave the way for the future of character and SEL education. In particular, the program content and structure, designed specifically to impact urban, middle school youth, in schools beset by institutional and structural inequities and challenges, can begin to fill the gap in our approach and knowledge about how to best reach and support these children to prepare them for success in college, career, and life. We look forward to analyzing our program results and preparing the MOSAIC program materials into accessible formats for widespread dissemination. In the future, the knowledge gained from the MOSAIC project can be utilized to inform developments of social, emotional, and character development in an array of contexts, age groups, and situations.

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Table 1. MOSAIC Virtues and Skills by Month

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

