



## Who is an Ethical Leader?: Perspectives From International Youth

**Shelby Clark**

**Daniel Mucinskas**

**Lynn Barendsen**

**Kirsten McHugh**

**Alison Cantor**

This is an unpublished conference paper for the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel & Magdalene Colleges, Oxford University, Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> – Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> January 2024.

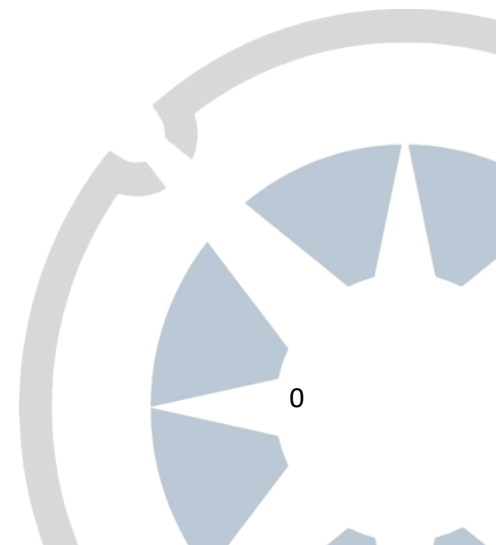
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Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875

E: [jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk) W: [www.jubileecentre.ac.uk](http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk)



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**Who is an ethical leader?: Perspectives from international youth**

Shelby Clark, Daniel Mucinkas, Lynn Barendsen, Kirsten McHugh, Alison Cantor  
Harvard University Graduate School of Education  
Project Zero, The Good Project

**Author Note**

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to Shelby Clark at  
[shelby\\_clark@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:shelby_clark@gse.harvard.edu) or at Longfellow 232, 13 Appian Way, Cambridge, MA, USA 02138.  
The

authors are grateful to The John Templeton Foundation for their support of this research.

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### **Abstract**

Research demonstrates beneficial outcomes associated with ethical leadership at work. While business leaders define ethical leadership via character strengths such as fairness and interpersonal behaviors, a youth perspective of this topic is missing. Utilizing student work gathered during implementation of The Good Project's lesson plans, this study aims to investigate youths' understandings of ethical leaders and role models. Findings indicate that youth primarily identified family members as role models, but also identified celebrities/athletes, business people/entrepreneurs, and teachers and role models. Youth predominantly attributed character strengths (68%) to their role models, with a particular focus on moral strengths. However, youths' profiles of strengths varied depending upon the type of role model discussed, suggesting that drawing on both proximal and inaccessible role models may be useful for fostering a variety of character strengths within students. In addition, 22% of adolescents' attributions for their role models included behaviors that were primarily prosocial in nature, suggesting a further connection between ethical leadership and a eudaimonic, flourishing life.

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### **Who is an ethical leader?: Perspectives from international youth**

The benefits of ethical leadership are well established. For example, perceiving business leaders as ethical is associated with increased work engagement, job performance, psychological well-being, job

satisfaction, ethical behaviors, self-efficacy, life and family satisfaction, promotability, employee flourishing (or *eudaimonia*), and group and firm level outcomes (e.g., organizational fairness) (Bedi et al.

2016; Hendriks et al., 2020; Ko et al., 2018). Likewise, ethical political leadership is associated with higher

public confidence in the nation and feelings of national safety (Zhu et al., 2012).

But, who is an ethical leader? Accounts differ regarding who adults perceive as an ethical leader. Weaver

et al. (2005) interviewed business professionals, who identified four categories of characteristics inherent to ethical leaders: interpersonal behaviors (e.g., care and concern, hardworking, supportive);

fairness (e.g., resources distributed equally, takes input); ethical actions and expectations for self (e.g.,

integrity, trustworthiness); and articulating ethical standards (e.g., uncompromising, puts ethics first).

Tanner et al. (2015) developed an Ethical Leadership Behavioral Scale (ELBS), which parsed ethical leadership into 35 questions oriented around the characteristics of support, fairness, honesty, and respect. Likewise, Kalshoven et al.'s (2011) Ethical Leadership at Work scale included seven factors of ethical characteristics: people orientation, fairness, power sharing, concern for sustainability, ethical guidance, role clarification, and integrity. Lawton and Páez (2015) created an integrated framework of

ethical leadership comprising three elements: virtues, integrity, and authenticity. Similarly, work by Arthur and colleagues (2019) investigated how entry-level professionals conceptualize what it means to be a “good professional.” In their work, they found that the overall top-rated professional virtues include honesty, judgment, fairness, teamwork, leadership, kindness, perseverance, and a love of learning. Thus, although there are differences, adults seem to coalesce around a central understanding of ethical leaders as those who demonstrate positive interpersonal behaviors, fairness, ethical actions, and ethical standards. However, do youth hold this same understanding of ethical leadership? To date, relatively little scholarship has explored youths’ understandings of ethical leaders. The predominant research in this field (e.g., Hammond et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2016) has identified the elements that youth find important in role models of good character: virtuous qualities (e.g., being kind), relational elements (e.g., receiving good advice), and altruism and advocacy (e.g., treating others well). Ethical leadership is directly relevant to the ongoing work of The Good Project, which has explored the nature of what it means to do “good work,” defined as excellent, ethical, and engaging (a framework called the “3 Es”). Based at The Harvard Graduate School of Education, The Good Project has researched the world of work for over 25 years and now, through a “good work” curriculum, encourages secondary students to reflect and discuss work-related dilemmas, examine role models, and reflect upon their identities, values, and sense of purpose in relation to current and future work. In order to understand youths’ conceptualizations of ethical leadership, the present study draws upon data from one year

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(2022-2023) of student work completed during the course of these lesson plans wherein youth defined their “good work” role models.

#### **Literature Review**

The world of work is changing, and ethical leaders will be needed to help prepare the workers of tomorrow. The gig economy, AI, and automation are on the rise, youth and adults desire more purposeful and meaningful careers, and many people lack the skills necessary to be successful in current and future jobs (OECD, 2019a, OECD, 2019b). We know that developing new character strengths and “soft skills” will be absolutely necessary for students to succeed in the jobs of tomorrow (McKinsey, 2019). For example, McKinsey (2019) listed critical thinking, intellectual autonomy, and empathy as being necessary for success. Deloitte (2021) listed imagination, empathy, curiosity, resilience, creativity, emotional intelligence, teaming, social intelligence, sense-making, critical thinking, and adaptive thinking as critical to the future of work. McKinsey (n.d.) notes that from 2016 to 2030 there will be a 24% increase in the total hours worked drawing upon social emotional skills. Perhaps more importantly for the current workforce, Deloitte (2021) has noted that these qualities must be “nurtured” or need to be developed through “learning, experience, and practice” (p.11).

#### **Modeling**

How can current youth and workers learn the skills and qualities needed for the future of work? In order

to cultivate the skills that we know are going to be necessary and more central to the future of work, role modeling can be a powerful tool for youth to discover and imitate the character strengths of others (Bandura et al., 1996). In fact, Berkowitz (2021), describing years of evidence of “what works in character education,” describes modeling as a key element of fostering student character. Such findings build upon years of work on the importance of moral exemplars for building individuals’ moral integrity (e.g., Colby, 1994; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2004; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2013). To date, the majority of studies that have examined role models for youth have focused on known role models in an adolescent’s life. However, Lerner et al. (2021) acknowledged that role models “may also be individuals who are not personally known to the participants (such as famous people, figures from history, or religious figures)” (p.299). Indeed, such role models are often a form of *parasocial relationships*, or “one-sided connections imagined with celebrities and media figures” (Gleason et al., 2017, p.1). Moreover, such role models have been found to be particularly impactful for adolescents (Gleason et al., 2017). Indeed, Strasser-Burke and Symonds (2020) found that while adolescents are more likely to select “accessible” role models in their local contexts, adolescents rely on similar “inaccessible” role models (such as famous persons) to help them form their sense of future self (see also Gibson, 2004; Han et al., 2021; Tian & Hoffner, 2010). It is important to note that — in accordance with social learning theory (Bandura et al., 1996) — adolescents will imitate those in their environmental contexts (both accessible and inaccessible), whether they serve as a successful role model with positive character strengths or a successful role

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model without positive character strengths. For example, Gaëlle and colleagues (2018) found that adolescents were more likely to engage in online “celebrity bashing” as well as online peer bullying if they believe that their peers, parents, and online celebrities engage in this behavior. Accordingly, it’s even more important that youth learn to be discerning in identifying the qualities of positive role models to emulate.

**Ethical or character-based role models.** A few studies have identified qualities that youth admire in ethical role models or role models of character. The majority of youth in a study by Johnson and colleagues (2016) identified virtuous qualities of the role model, such as being “nice” or “kind.” The second largest group identified elements of their relationship with the role model, such as receiving good advice from the person or doing fun things with him/her. The third category included choosing role

models who treated others well, such as those who were altruistic. Many role models were identified as

fitting into all three categories. To our knowledge, at present, Hammond and colleagues (2022) have investigated most specifically the characteristics and qualities of famous role models that youth look for

in terms of character virtues or ethical qualities. In their research on “famous character role models (FCRMs),” Hammond and colleagues (2022) found that youth identified entertainers the most (31.5%),

then religious figures (13.1%), politicians (10.7%), activists (10.4%), athletes (9.9%), and so on as their

key FCRMs. Perhaps more importantly, they note that over half the qualities youth identified as important in these role models were character virtues, such as authenticity, caring, and being



hardworking. Other large categories included the person's identity, the similarity of the person to the youth, and whether or not the person was an advocate.

**Ethical leadership.** As noted above, there is no agreed upon definition of what defines an "ethical leader." Here, aligning with Hoch and colleagues (2018), we take a broad definition of ethical leadership that encompasses other forms of positive leadership, such as transformational, authentic, and servant leadership theories, that focus on positive interpersonal dynamics in conjunction with ethical and moral behavior. Whereas Hoch et al. (2018) worked with adults, some might assume that youth would perceive similar characteristics in an ethical leader. However, current research indicates that values may vary across generations as well as developmentally. For example, Leijen and colleagues (2022) found that Millennials (born 1980-1992) valued hedonism more than other generations. Adults have also been found to become more conservative in their values over time (Milfront et al, 2016). Given the importance role modeling can play in developing adolescents' character strengths and future identity expectations, understanding youths' own conceptualization of ethical leadership becomes increasingly imperative.

Finally, scholarship surrounding the role of role models in fostering *ethical leadership* specifically in youth, or role models for youth work in general, remains relatively limited (Bowers et al., 2016; Che Nee Foy, 2019). Brown and Treviño (2014) found that having childhood role models was correlated with higher ethical leadership in young leaders, whereas career role models were associated with higher ethical leadership in top business leaders. Bowers and colleagues (2016) found that role models were responsible for adolescents' understanding of how to be leaders and definitions of success, as well as their desire to become leaders, awareness of how to do so, and pursuit of those opportunities. Other

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work by Wiese and Freund (2011) found that adolescents use their parents as role models regarding work involvement; that is, they found that youth tend to use parents of the same sex as role models for their own work plans and parents of the opposite sex as guides for how much they would like their future life partners to engage in work.

### **Context & Method**

This study is drawn from an ongoing mixed-methods research project exploring implementation of a set

of lesson plans designed by The Good Project for a global teacher community of practice. These 45-minute lessons use dilemmas and reflection exercises to allow students to explore their own goals,

responsibilities, and values while prompting them to navigate complex real-world situations. The curriculum aims to help adolescents develop and internalize moral (i.e., a good neighbor), civic (i.e., a

good citizen), performance (i.e., a good student/worker), and intellectual (i.e., a good thinker) character

strengths (Baehr, 2022). These character strengths align with The Good Project's 3 Es of good work: Ethical (for the greater good); Excellent (high quality); and Engaging (meaningful).

**Sample.** Twelve schools, located in the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Romania, India, Poland, Mexico, Canada, Spain, Colombia, and Nigeria, participated. 27 teachers in total from these schools submitted student work, with students' grade levels ranging from Middle School to early University.

Due

to the anonymized way in which teachers submitted student work, it is not possible to estimate the exact

number of students in the sample. In all, 594 documents were coded.

**Procedure.** Teachers participating in a research community of practice who were completing The Good Project’s sixteen “good work” lesson plans were asked to submit students’ work at the close of the 2022-2023 school year. Not all teachers were able to submit work, nor were they able to submit work for all of their students due to either lack of consent or logistical issues. Once work was submitted securely to the research team, it was subsequently anonymized and stripped of identifying information if such information was still attached to the documents. Two activities were qualitatively coded for this study from the curriculum’s first lesson. First, students completed a reflection about one individual they considered a “good worker.” Second, students completed the lesson homework assignment, entitled “Who does good work?”, which asks students to identify three people (real or fictional) that they consider to be good workers, and then to respond to the following question for each individual: “What is it about these people that makes them good workers?” On the following page, students were asked to consider, “What qualities do these individuals share?”, “What makes these people different from each other?”, and “What makes you admire these people?”. Notably, at this point in the lessons, some students had already been exposed to The Good Project’s “3 Es” framework of “good work” (Excellence, Ethics, and Engagement), whereas others had not. Some participating teachers in the community of practice chose to have their students complete these lesson elements, while others did not.

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**Data Analysis.** Qualitative coding in this study was completed in Atlas.ti and drew upon Charmaz's (2006) Grounded Theory and Braun & Clarke's (2013) Thematic Analysis. The data went through four rounds of coding and analysis:

1. In the first round of coding, drawing on Grounded Theory, the data was examined for emergent, *emic* and "in-vivo" codes that came from the data itself (Maxwell, 2013). At this point, bottom-up codes emerged such as "Makes good decisions," "Best at what they do," and "Gives emotional support." See Appendix A for the full list of codes and their total code count.
2. In the second round of coding, analyses became a more iterative process between *emic* and *etic* coding (Braun & Clark, 2013), with larger merged categories emerging as well as broader overarching themes. At this point, merged codes such as "Teamwork/Collaboration/Sociable" and "Critical Thinker/Problem Solver/Logical" emerged, as well as larger coding themes such as "Attributes/Qualities," "Good Project Framework," "Behaviors," and "Types of People."
3. In the third round of coding, once all data had been coded for *etic* and *emic* emerging themes, Atlas.ti software was used to create a code co-occurrence matrix in order to look for areas of overlap and wider trends. In order to further investigate these trends, we created a network visualization of overlapping codes that were coded together more than 20 times. This allowed us to visualize areas of strong co-occurrence amongst codes.
4. In the fourth round of coding, we synthesized character taxonomies found in Arthur and Earl (2020), Arthur et al. (2019), McGrath et al. (2016), and Han and McGrath (2023) in order to categorize how the attributes identified by students fell into the moral, intellectual, and performance character strength taxonomies found in the broader character literature.

## Results

See Appendix A for full coded results. This data sheds light on a variety of elements regarding how youth conceptualized ethical leaders, or, as they identified them in their student work, “good workers.” Here, we discuss both *who* they identified as role models, as well as the attributes and characteristics youth ascribed to these role models.

***Who Was Identified as a Role Model?***

Within the student work, the top form of “good work” role model identified by students was a family member, with 27.5% of documents coded as “family.” Fathers and mothers were often identified as role models; however, other family members were also mentioned, such as grandfathers, “cousin-brothers,” aunts, grandmothers, and more (see Figure 1). Following family, the second and third most mentioned role models were celebrities and fictional role models, with 11 and 10.8% of documents, respectively. For these, popular figures in the media were often mentioned, such as K-pop stars BTS or athletes that students idolized (e.g., Michael Jordan, Lionel

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Messi). For fictional characters, students mentioned TV or movie shows they loved or book characters they had read (e.g., Avengers characters, Harry Potter).

These categories were not mutually exclusive. As noted, celebrities were often athletes, with 46% of cases characterized as such. 10% of the times family was discussed, students mentioned that their family

members were involved in business, and another 8% of times they mentioned that a family member was a teacher. “Business/entrepreneurship” and “Inventor” were co-coded frequently, as 69% of these co-codings were due to students referencing the businessman and prominent inventor Elon Musk as their example of a good worker. “Public figure/political” and “Historical figure” were also commonly co-coded (46%), given that many students referred to deceased statespersons such as Queen Elizabeth, Princess Diana, and more.

**Figure 1**

*Percentage of codes ascribed to each type of role model*

**What Did Students Describe About Role Models?**

The majority of students described their good work role models using some form of character strength.

Indeed, 68% of coding was dedicated to character attributes and qualities, whereas only 22% was dedicated to behaviors, and 10% was dedicated to the Good Work framework elements of excellence, ethics, and engagement (see Figure 2).

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**Figure 2.**

*Pie chart breaking down coding between behaviors, character strengths, and Good Work framework.*

**Character Strengths.** Youth identified a plethora of character strengths and attributes in their role models, with 32 character-based items representing more than 1% of the coded data (see Table 1).

Most prominently, students noted that good workers are hardworking, dedicated, tenacious, caring, selfless, honest, kind, and smart. Examining further how these characteristics fell within the moral, performance, and intellectual character strength taxonomies, we see that 37.5% of attributes were

moral character strengths, 31.3% were intellectual character strengths, and 31.3% were performance character strengths (see Table 1). In addition, see Appendix B for students' top character strengths (Table 1) compared to adults' top ranked professional character strengths as discussed by [Arthur and colleagues \(2019\)](#). The data makes evident that, apart from fairness, all of the same top character strengths are mentioned in some way by both adults and students.

**Table 1.**

*Top character strengths and attributes identified in good work role models by percentage, categorized into intellectual, moral, and performance character strengths.*

Rank	Strength	Percent	Rank	Strength	Percent	Rank	Strength	Percent	Rank	Strength	Percent
1	Hardworking	10.10%	9	Successful	3%	17	Determination	1.60%	25	Talented	1.20%
2	Dedicated	6.20%	10	Positive	2.90%	18	Leadership	1.60%	26	Wealthy	1.20%
3	Tenacity	4%	11	Inspiring	2.60%	19	Collaborative	1.60%	27	Loving	1.10%
4	Caring	3.70%	12	Passionate	2.30%	20	Sacrificial	1.40%	28	Organized	1.10%
5	Selfless	3.50%	13	Desire to Improve	2.10%	21	Creative	1.40%	29	Punctual	1.10%
6	Honest	3.30%	14	Brave	2%	22	Confident	1.30%	30	Respectful	1.10%
7	Kindness	3.20%	15	Goal Oriented	2%	23	Disciplined	1.30%	31		
	Time Management	1.10%									
8	Smart	3%	16	Responsible	1.70%	24	Motivated	1.30%	32	Loyal	1%

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Intellectual Character Moral Character Performance Character

**Behaviors.** Although the ways in which students described their good work role models was primarily in terms of character strengths, qualities, and attributes, 22% of coding was also devoted to

behaviors. In particular, 15.1% of good worker role models were described as “helping others” in some capacity, with 9.5% also described as contributing to society. Another 9.5% described as helping others learn in some capacity (Table 2).

**Table 2.**

*Top behaviors identified in good work role models by percentage.*

**Behavior Percent Behavior Percent**

Helps Others (with their Problems) 15.10%	Spreads Awareness/Activism 4.10%
Contributes to Society 9.50%	Makes Good Decisions 3.60%
Helps Others Learn 9.50%	Saves lives/Protects 3.00%
Considers Others’ Wellbeing/Happiness 8.10%	Challenges Others to Grow 2.70%
Has Overcome Challenges 6.60%	Balances Work/Life 2.00%
Provides for me/others 5.20%	Gives Emotional Support 2.00%
Serves the Nation 4.80%	Environmental Benefits 1.80%
Long hours/Spends Time 4.60%	Advanced a field 1.40%
Homemaking 4.40%	Relates to participant's own interests 1.40%
Donates/Philanthropy 4.20%	Gives Time 1.30%

**Good Work Framework.** In addition to character strengths and behaviors, some students also referenced ideas associated with the Good Project’s framework of the 3Es—ethics, excellence, and engagement—when describing their good work role models. The Good Project conceptualizes ethics as

considering one’s responsibility to communities and the wider world, excellence as doing quality work,

and engagement as taking part in fulfilling, meaningful, and purposeful work. In their answers, students

were most likely to mention ideas related to that of “excellence” in their good work role models (47.5%).

However, engagement was often indicated as well (32.2%). Notably, in relation to excellence, the in-vivo

concept of role-models being the “Best at what they do” was mentioned several times by students and

therefore was coded separately within this section (5.2%). Less prominent were discussions of ethics (15.1%).

**Figure 3**

*Pie chart breaking down coding of the Good Project framework concepts of excellence, ethics, engagement and “Best at What They Do.”*



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***Interconnections Between Codes***

As noted, when discussing the types of people that students discussed as role models, codes were not standalone, and there were a variety of revealing intersections between the coding co-occurrences (Figure 4). Four “themes” or “nodes” with the greatest number of co-occurrences were further examined.

**Figure 4**

*Network map exploring the main coding co-occurrences between codes coded more than 20 times in the data.*

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\*Note, the thickness of the gray line between the codes indicates how many times the codes were co-coded together. The thicker the line, the more the two codes were intertwined.

**Theme 1: Helping others.** The first main theme that emerged was surrounding the code of “helping others.” In examining this node, we begin to see that students are looking to those who are close to them in their environments—their family members and community members—as role models who they see as selfless and who they see as helpers in society. Notably, fictional characters also come up in this node, perhaps as role models with whom students can easily identify. It’s also clear from this node that students see a helping role model as one who relies primarily on moral and performance character strengths. This person is selfless and kind (both moral strengths) but also must rely on their excellence, hard work, and dedication (all performance strengths).

### **Figure 5**

*Network map exploring the code co-occurrences surrounding the code of “helping others.”*

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**Theme 2: Family.** The second theme surrounds the idea of the importance of family as good worker role models for students. Figure 5 demonstrates how this node is perhaps the most far-reaching within the data, with family members connecting to several behaviors, character strengths, and good work framework attributes. The node demonstrates how many students view their parents as caring providers who demonstrate to them how to be helpful in the world, particularly by drawing on moral and performance character strengths such as hard work, tenacity, dedication, and honesty. Moreover, family members were also often identified as homemakers, teachers, or businessmen/women, and it was through these professions that students noted that they were able to demonstrate these character strengths. Interestingly, students recognized and valued the work that goes into caring for a family, a result that we have not seen in previous good work studies.

### Figure 5

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*Network map exploring the code co-occurrences surrounding the code of “family.”*

**Theme 3: Hardworking.** The third theme surrounds the importance of “hardworking” as a core value of good workers for students. Noticeably, apart from family members, businessmen/women or entrepreneurs, and celebrities/athletes were the most prominent types of people that students associated as hard workers. Again, students describe a variety of moral and performance character strengths in co-occurrence with being hardworking, such as honesty, selflessness, and kindness (moral strengths), as well as being disciplined, tenacious, and dedicated (performance strengths). However, unlike the previous two networks, an intellectual character strength is also linked with these other strengths, with students associating being smart, intelligent, or wise with being hardworking.

### **Figure 6**

*Network map exploring the code co-occurrences surrounding the code of “hardworking.”*

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**Theme 4: Excellence.** The fourth and final theme surrounds the Good Project framework concept of “Excellence.” Family members are again connected as role models of excellence, but notably celebrities who are *not* athletes are also described as excellent. These individuals appear to demonstrate a variety of moral and performance strengths but also embody the intellectual strength of a growth mindset and a love of learning through their desire to continue improving and learning. Such models are engaged and interested in their work, with a desire to help others.

**Figure 7**

*Network map exploring the code co-occurrences surrounding the code of “excellence.”*

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### **Discussion**

We began this paper with the question: how do youth understand ethical leadership? Drawing on qualitative data coding of student work wherein students described their “good worker” role models, the present results indicate that youth primarily understand ethical leaders in terms of character strengths, followed by ethical behaviors, and then engaging in core “good work” concepts identified by The Good Project, including ethics, engagement, and excellence. In fact, 68% of students’ responses were coded as containing character attributes, followed by 22% containing behaviors, and 10% containing Good Work framework elements. In particular, youth primarily identified moral character strengths associated with their examples of role models, including attributes like caring, selfless, and honest; however, overall, the most commonly identified attribute in role models was “hardworking” (10.10%). These findings align with current scholarship, which has found that youth primarily identified virtuous qualities (such as being “nice” or “kind”) in ethical role models (Johnson et al., 2016). We also sought to understand whether youths’ understandings of ethical leaders align with those of adults. Adults, as discussed, tend to understand ethical leaders as those who demonstrate positive interpersonal behaviors, fairness, ethical actions, and ethical standards (Arthur et al., 2019; Kalshoven et al., 2011; Lawton & Páez, 2015; Tanner et al., 2015). The findings indicate that students and adults share

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a sense of the types of character strengths that form a good worker; they jointly identify someone who is honest, kind, tenacious, loves learning or improving themselves, is smart or makes good judgements, is a leader, and who collaborates well. Students, however, placed more primacy on other intellectual and performance character strengths than adults, with strengths such as dedication and courage within their top 15 noted character strengths. Importantly, however, the strengths most identified by adults and current students do *not* align with those noted as most important for the future of work. As Deloitte (2021) described, future “good” workers will need to be creative, curious, empathic, resilient, emotionally intelligent, collaborative, socially intelligent, able to create meaning and synthesize experience, critical thinkers, and adaptive thinkers. Of these qualities, only collaboration was identified as a top character strength by students. Such a finding indicates perhaps a dearth of role models for students who embody these forward-looking characteristics. Looking at who students admire as good work role models sheds additional light on who can serve as role models for students. Students primarily described their family members as role models, followed by celebrities, fictional role models, business/entrepreneurs, teachers, and more. Examining the code co-occurrence nodes further illuminates how students envisioned these role models. For example, the findings indicate that students primarily look to those close to them in their environments—family

members, community members, and fictional characters—as exemplars of helping others. Alternatively, students think of family members, business people/entrepreneurs, or celebrities/athletes when considering particularly hard working role models. Furthermore, students described *non-athletic* celebrities and family members as examples of engaged, excellent role models who help others. Such findings further develop the work of scholars such as Strasser-Burke and Symonds (2020), who have found that adolescents select both accessible (proximal) and inaccessible role models, but with a focus on more proximal role models. Here, too, students focused more on proximal, accessible role models, particularly family members, but also drew on inaccessible role models (see also Hammond et al., 2022). Like Strasser-Burke and Symonds (2020), who found that youth turn first to proximal role models for emotional and cognitive support, our results indicate that adolescents found their family members to be associated with wide ranging forms of support, such as being “caring,” “helping others,” “helping others learn,” “providing for me/others,” and more. However, these findings build on Strasser-Burke and Symonds’ (2020) findings, which found that students’ had more non-specific reasons for admiring inaccessible role models. Our results indicate that students’ forms of role models are associated with different forms of character strengths, attributes, and behaviors. When looking to inspire youth towards future ethical leadership, drawing on all forms of good work role models may be necessary in order to cultivate the various strengths and behaviors we hope to cultivate in students. Finally, it is notable that 22% of students’ responses were focused on behaviors rather than character strengths, with the majority of these behaviors focused on serving others in some capacity. For example, students prioritized helping others, contributing to society, helping others learn, considering others’ wellbeing and happiness, providing for others, and serving the nation. Although students spoke about these behaviors in terms of actions rather than attributes, many character strengths frameworks (e.g., The Jubilee Centre, 2022) would consider these behaviors as examples of *civic character* strengths, such as social responsibility, citizenship, neighborliness, and service. Indeed, the Jubilee Centre (2022) defines



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civic character as “traits that are necessary for engaged responsible citizenship, contributing to the common good” (p. 9). Moreover, the prominence of such a focus on prosocial activities—“intentional actions that help or benefit others” (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010, p. 222)—in students’ responses opens new questions regarding the connections between ethical leadership and a *eudaimonic*, flourishing life. Given the complex overlaps and mediating factors between prosociality and *eudaimonic* flourishing (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Martela, 2016; Sheldon, 2018), further research is needed to explore ethical leaders’ prosocial, civic behaviors and their ultimate flourishing.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without its limitations. As a qualitative study, no causal claims can be made. Furthermore, the study examines role models for adolescent youth from several countries around the world; however, as a close qualitative reading of students’ work, these findings are not meant to be generalizable to a wide population of different age ranges, countries, or other demographic indicators. Rather, the findings offer suggestions for further consideration about how youth conceptualize professional role models. In addition, as the data were only coded by one coder, there is the potential for rater-bias to have skewed the results. A close, *in-vivo*, coding of the documents was performed in order

to help allay this concern. Finally, student reactivity may have biased the results, with students offering inauthentic answers due to their awareness of being in a research study (Zahle, 2023). We are hopeful that the long delay between student completion of this activity (as part of Lesson 1.1) and collection at the end of the school year may have diminished this potential bias (Zahle, 2023).

### **Conclusion**

We are hopeful that this study will contribute to the growing understanding of ethical leadership by centering youth voices. At a time when the world of work is experiencing extreme change, strong ethical leadership is crucial. However, what the future of work needs (ethical leaders with character strengths such as creativity, empathy and resilience) and what youth identify as important character strengths are not fully aligned with one another. This may be the result of a lack of role models that embody these critical character strengths. In any case, this gap between needs and youth values is telling. Certainly, understanding what students *do* value in role models, how they come to identify these role models and how this contributes to their conceptualization of ethical leadership is critical. In order to inspire youth to become ethical leaders, we must continue to center and learn from their perspectives. What youth value in role models is one significant element in the development of future ethical leaders; how they grapple with ethical challenges and reflect upon their learnings is equally important and will be examined in future data analysis.

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**Appendix A**

**All Codes**

**Code Total Count**

Hardworking/work ethic 298

Family 268

Excellence 202



Dedication/Diligence 183  
Helps Others (with their Problems) 141  
Engagement 137  
Tenacity/Persistence/Perseverant 117  
Caring/Understanding/Listening 109  
Celebrity 106  
Fictional 106  
Selfless/Not Money Driven 104  
Honest 96  
Kindness 93  
Smart/Intelligent/Witty/Educated 89  
Contribution to Society 89  
Helps Others Learn 89  
Success 87  
Positive/Optimistic/Hope/Happy 86  
Business/Entrepreneur 77  
Considers Other's Welling/Happiness 76  
Inspiring 75  
Teacher 69  
Passionate 67  
Ethical 64  
Historical Figure 63  
Overcoming Challenges 62  
Desire to Improve 61  
Future or Goal Minded 60

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WHO IS ETHICAL 24

**Code Total Count**

Public Figure/Politician 56

Community Member 55  
Brave/Courageous 54  
Responsible 51  
Provide for me/others 49  
Athletic 48  
Determination 48  
Leadership 46  
Teamwork/Collaboration/Sociable 46  
Serves the Nation 45  
Long hours/Spends Time 43  
Sacrifices 41  
Homemaking 41  
Imagination/Creativity 40  
Donates/Philanthropy 39  
Motivation/Drive/Willpower 38  
Spread Awareness/Activism 38  
Confident 37  
Disciplined 37  
Skillful/Talented 35  
Wealth/Financial Security 35  
Makes Good Decisions 34  
Punctual 33  
Organized 32  
Time Management 32  
Inventor/Invented 32  
Loving 31  
Respect 31  
Loyal 30  
Save lives/Protect 28  
Integrity 27

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WHO IS ETHICAL 25

**Code Total Count**

Academic/Scientist 26

Peer/Student 26

Calm 25

Challenges Others to Grow 25

Stability/Consistency 24

Communication 23

Critical Thinker/Problem Solver/Logical 23

Best at What They Do 22

Adaptable/Flexible/Versatile 22

Patient 22

Humble 21

Open-Minded/Tolerant 21

Efficient 19

Empathetic 19

Balances Work/Life 19

Gives Emotional Support 19

Has Faith 18

Human Rights 18

Compassionate 17

Enthusiastic 17

Innovative/Inventive 17

Environmental Benefits 17

Fighter/warrior/protector 17

People know who they are 16

Focused 15

Sincere 15

Fun/Humor 14  
Generosity 14  
Artist/Writer/Etc. 14  
DUPLICATE 14  
Tag 14

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WHO IS ETHICAL 26

**Code Total Count**

Ambition 13  
Commitment 13  
Advanced a field 13  
Own Interests 13  
Independent 12  
Takes risks 12  
Gives Time 12  
Treats Others Equally 12  
People respect them 12  
Authentic 11  
Multitasker 11  
Curious 10  
Reliable 9  
Religious Figure 9  
Effective 8  
Professionalism 8  
Gives Attention 8  
Experienced 7  
Prepared 7  
Strong 7  
Other's Success 7

Entertaining 6  
Gratitude 6  
Resilient 6  
Attentive 5  
Encouraging 5  
Friendly 5  
Objective 5  
Resourceful 5  
Strong-Minded 5  
Supportive 5

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WHO IS ETHICAL 27

**Code Total Count**

Thorough 5  
Service 5  
People like them 5  
Charismatic/Persuasive 4  
Conscientious 4  
Dutiful 4  
Lovely 4  
Non-Violence 4  
Polite 4  
Practical 4  
Precision 4  
Proud 4  
Tell others what to do 4  
Aggressive 3  
Fair 3  
Humanity 3

Justice 3  
Powerful 3  
Practices 3  
Productive 3  
Straight Forward 3  
Accountable 2  
Eager 2  
Frugality 2  
Inclusive 2  
Modest 2  
Prudent 2  
Righteous 2  
Self-aware 2  
Self-Control 2  
Strategizes 2

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WHO IS ETHICAL 28

**Code Total Count**

Thoughtful 2  
Trustworthy 2  
Visionary 2  
Considers Consequences 2  
Use of Stories 2  
People listen to them 2  
Personal Growth 2  
Assertive 1  
Beauty 1  
Careful 1  
Compromise 1

Decisive 1  
Dignity 1  
Does not engage with work 1  
Easy Going 1  
Emotional Intelligence/Strength 1  
Happy 1  
Manipulative 1  
Physical Strength 1  
Proactive 1  
Reasonable 1  
Relatable 1  
See the Bigger Picture 1  
Systematic 1  
Networking 1  
Works with Others 1  
Resources 1  
Scale of Impact 1

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**Appendix B**

**Comparison of Adult Character Strengths & Youth Character Strengths for Ethical Leaders**

**Character Strength Rank- Adults**

**(Arthur et al.,  
2019)**

**Rank-Youth**

Honesty 1 6  
Judgment/Smart 2 8  
Fairness 3 N/A

Teamwork 4 19  
Leadership 5 18  
Kindness 6 7  
Perseverance 7 3  
Love of Learning/Desire to Improve 8 13