Character Development at Children's Museum of Pittsburgh: An Initial Position Paper

About the Museum

The mission of Children's Museum of Pittsburgh is *to provide innovative and inclusive museum experiences that inspire kindness, joy, creativity, and curiosity for all learners. We forge connections with artists, community partners and neighbors to work on behalf of children, youth and families.* Our vision is to transform education. We are always looking for new ideas to expand our mission in new and innovative ways. In 2023, the Lilly Endowments awarded the Museum with a generous planning grant that gives us the opportunity to explore the topic of character development as a new lens that could enhance our work. This paper summarizes our current thinking about the ways character development aligns with our mission and the grounding approaches we will use for this work.

What is character development?

A person's character is what centers them in their world, influencing the ways they approach situations and make decisions; their interactions with other people, animals, and the environment; and their inner states and intentions. While the notion of character is universal, it has no single, agreed-upon definition.[i] However, we can think of character as what qualifies someone as a "good person"—including their values, behaviors, and motivations.[ii,iii] Character is context-dependent, and our understandings of character evolve throughout our lifespans.[i,iv,v] Educational experiences that focus on character provide opportunities for people to learn about different values and character traits; practice behaving in ways that enact those traits; and engage in critical thinking about what elements of character are most important to them and how this varies based on where they are, what is happening, and who they are with.

Why should the Museum explore character development?

By investigating and fostering character development, the Museum can promote numerous positive outcomes:

1) **Benefitting our community:** The Museum's mission aims to enhance the lives of all learners. Character development has tremendous potential to support our audience to become the types of people they want to be. Character development is linked to human flourishing, wellness, enhanced learning, and vibrant communities.[i,vi,vii]

2) **Deepening our mission:** An emphasis on character development challenges us to think about how we can commit to our mission as more than momentary inspiration of kindness, joy, creativity, and curiosity. Instead, how we can use these experiences to initiate long-term impacts that influence people's ongoing habits and lives?

3) **Contributing new insights:** While there is a robust field of research and practical expertise about character development, most prior work has focused on older youth and adults. By engaging with young children, families, artists, and educators, our work could be valuable for many other museums, schools, and researchers who are interested in understanding the full developmental trajectory of character.

Children's Museum of Pittsburgh's Preliminary Framework for Character Development

Our approach to character development has two levels, as shown in the graphic below. An inner circle describes three processes of character development that learners engage in through Museum-based experiences: learning about character and character traits, practicing character skills, and discerning values in various contexts. An outer circle in the diagram illustrates five core pillars that drive our approach to character education: our mission, a commitment to upholding multiple dimensions of character, an affirming perspective on character strengths, an understanding of character as dynamic, and a consideration of character development as being interconnected with broader communities and systems beyond the Museum. The following pages describe this framework in further detail.
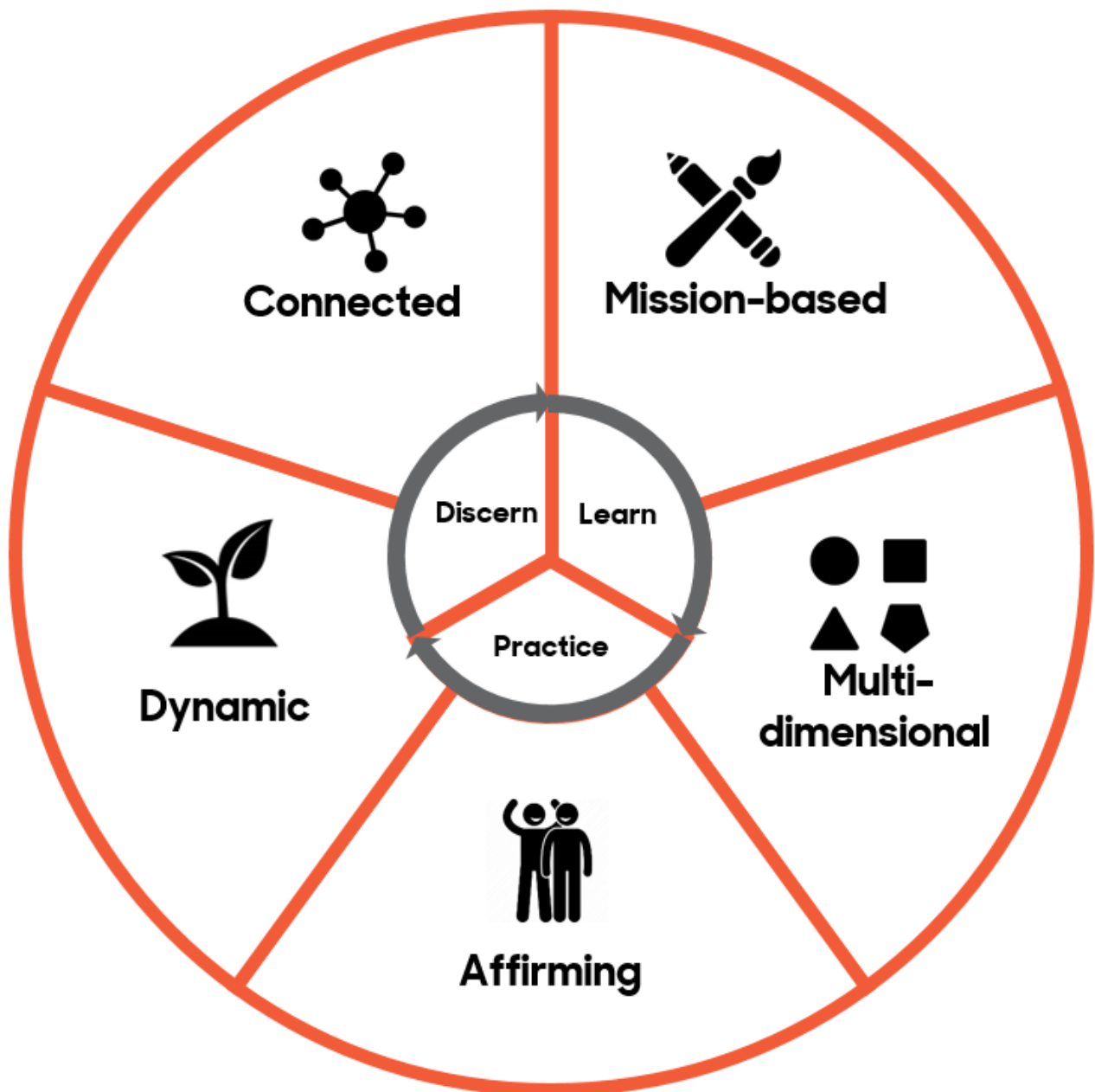
Learn-Practice-Discern: The Processes of Character Development at the Museum

While we believe there are many ways people can learn about character, we focus our approach on three main processes:

1) **Learn:** Character development requires foundational knowledge about what character is and what character traits are.[i, iv, v, viii] Building learners' vocabulary about character opens up their ability to discuss, reason about, and engage in character-driven behavior.[i, ix] Sharing stories about characters who demonstrate character traits can provide exemplars for learners to emulate.[iii] Recognizing that character is often learned socially,[i, iv] the Museum also invests in professional development for staff who can model and discuss character with visitors.

2) **Practice:** While basic understanding about character is necessary, experts on the subject have noted that school-based character education programs often prioritize knowledge and underemphasize practical application of character.[x] The Museum's experiential learning environment is ideal for this practice-based character education. Curated museum experiences create opportunities for learners to exercise character traits and build character skills. These experiences may focus on practicing a single trait or may present situations that visitors can approach with different character strengths, each resulting in different outcomes.

3) **Discern:** Beyond learning and practicing skills, our capacity to internalize character and use it to guide our lives depends on us taking the time to reflect and process our learning.[i, iv] Furthermore, character is not static; it demands moral thinking about how to do the right thing at the right time for the right reasons.[ii] Thus, the Museum designs opportunities for people to consider multiple character traits and assess their utility in various contexts. This critical thinking can range from simple questions—like which of two traits might be most valuable in a given scenario—to supporting visitors as they craft their own mission statements and make commitments about how they plan to enact their values in their lives.

Some Museum experiences may involve only one of these three processes while others will incorporate two or three. The balance between them is adaptable for different audiences and formats. For instance, with our youngest learners, an emphasis on learning about character words may be appropriate. In contrast, adult learners who have a firm grasp on character concepts may value an emphasis on discerning which character traits are most important to them. While deeper levels of discernment will be most developmentally appropriate for older learners, our research suggests that many children will be able to engage in simple aspects of all three processes of character development by preschool age.[xi, xii]

At the Museum, character is *taught* through exhibits and programming, it can be *caught* from trained educators who model character, and we foster opportunities for character to be *sought* through activities that encourage visitors to make autonomous choices about what matters to them and commit to pursuing those values in their lives.[i]
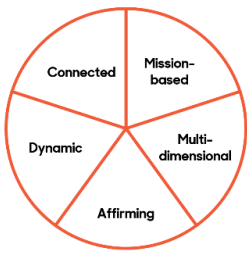
Five Core Pillars that Ground the Museum's Approach to Character Development

Throughout the Museum's work on character development, we emphasize the following five ways of thinking about character:

Mission-based: Our mission is a character document. When we make organizational decisions that prioritize kindness, joy, creativity, and curiosity, we are demonstrating character. As we welcome visitors into our space, we invite others to "try on" kindness, joy, creativity, and curiosity. Whether visitors experience these things momentarily, learn about them, practice them, or commit to having them guide their decision-making like we do, our mission is our starting place for character development.
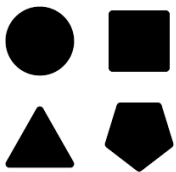
Multi-dimensional: Character is richly complex and context-dependent.[i, iii, xiii] Different cultures have varying priorities for character.[i, xiv, xv] Within communities, the range of people's values is often even wider than the differences we see between different locations.[xv] Recognizing and celebrating this diversity, the Museum aims to expose people to many aspects of character and encourage learners to determine for themselves what matters most for them and their families.
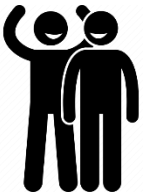
Affirming: At the Museum, we celebrate character strengths rather than prompting guilt or shame. We affirm that everyone has goodness within them and each person has the capacity to grow their character.[i, xvi] Taking a holistic approach, we also recognize that it is harder to act with good character when we are struggling to meet our basic needs.[i, xvii] The Museum takes a non-judgmental stance and creates environments where people can thrive in pursuit of their best selves.

Dynamic: Scientists agree that character development is an ongoing process with no single endpoint and our brains do not possess the full capacity for character discernment until adulthood.[ii, xiii, xv] Our approach is attentive to children's developmental milestones and creates age-appropriate learning experiences to support ongoing character growth. Based on developmental science, we begin our character development programming in preschool.[xi, xii]

Connected: Our final pillar relates to the ways character development is part of a larger system.[i, iii, iv, xviii, xix] We look to complement the character learning that our learners experience through their families, schools, religious groups, and other out-of-school learning opportunities. Our sentence starters "I am, you are, and we are" invites us to think of ourselves and how we relate to others. Similarly, we recognize that character traits are interconnected and learning can be enhanced when we consider multiple traits in relation to one another.[i, x, xx]

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