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Inspire>Aspire: Executive Summary

Final Report of a Planning Project and Process Evaluation

John Templeton Foundation

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The picture we get of today's young people often seems bleak: they are disengaged from civic life, they engage in risky sexual behavior, they display confused moral reasoning, and have materialistic goals (Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011). Youth today are at a crossroads. Despite the challenges they face, they have the potential to be active, engaged, contributing members of civil society if they are provided with appropriate and much needed support from peers, families, and schools. Character education programs that specifically focus on helping youth to identify and reflect on positive personal values and transform those values into meaningful, sustained action hold tremendous promise for avoiding the pitfalls of adolescence and young adulthood and producing a generation of youth who are able to demonstrate moral fortitude and thrive in today's complex, global world. Inspire>Aspire: Global Citizens in the Making is one such promising character education program.

Program Description

Inspire>Aspire: Global Citizens in the Making was developed in the United Kingdom by Character Scotland. The program has been implemented in over **60** countries and has reached around **100,000** youth ages 10-18. Using a unique poster template and web-based resources, students engage in a process of self-discovery where they reflect on: their strengths and areas in need of improvement, who and what inspires them, and who they want to become and what they want to achieve in life. The poster process can be summarized as follows: 1) Critical self-reflection on one's own virtues and personal qualities which is hypothesized to lead to enhanced self-awareness and empathy – each person has a list of their strong points and what they need to work on; 2) Relating these virtues and qualities to an inspirational figure of real substance and how they helped this person to outstanding achievement – this translates theoretical concepts into practical living; 3) Sourcing and commenting on inspirational quotations as maxims for life and

living; 4) Choosing an inspirational story that has an important message for life; 5) Translating this inspiration into aspiration by focusing on key questions relating to what kind of person one wants to become and what one wants to achieve and contribute to others; and, 6) Soliciting feedback on what the young person has learned, which helps them reflect on the value of the whole process.
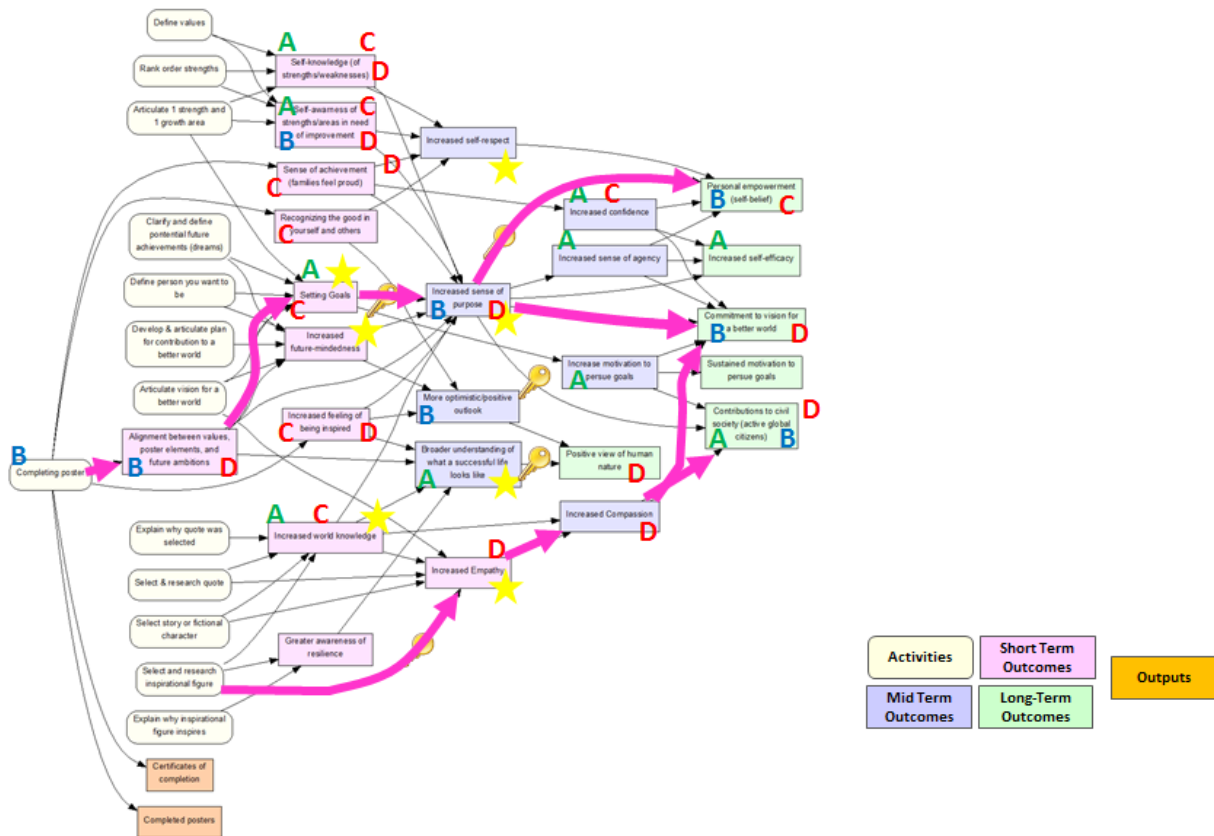
This project is a collaboration between Character Scotland, who developed and distributes Inspire>Aspire, and the Research on Evaluation and Developmental Systems Science (REDSS) Lab at Montclair State University, who conducted the planning, process, and pilot outcome evaluation of Inspire>Aspire. Inspire>Aspire and the research and evaluation presented in this report have been supported by grants from the John Templeton Foundation.

Big Questions and Study Aims

The primary **Big Question** this planning project and the subsequent process and pilot outcome evaluation aimed to address were: (1) Can reflecting on and writing about the virtues espoused in the Laws of Life improve adolescent character development? In order to begin to address the primary Big Question, this project investigated the following additional Big Questions: (2) What is the overarching theory of change for Inspire>Aspire: Global Citizens in the Making Values Poster program (INSPIRE>ASPIRE)?, (3) How is the theory of change best assessed?, and (4) Does preliminary evidence support the theory of change? To address the Big Questions, the project had the following **Aims**: (1) Assess variations in program implementation; (2) Pilot test quantitative measures of key character outcomes; (3) Validate the theory of change using qualitative interviews of youth; and, (4) Assess the relationship between variations in program implementation (e.g., differences in dosage) and poster quality.

Study Design and Participants

In order to assess the second Big Question (What is the overarching theory of change for Inspire>Aspire: Global Citizens in the Making Values Poster program), researchers from REDSS Lab worked with the program developers at Character Scotland to develop a theory of change. Using the Systems Evaluation Protocol (Trochim et al., 2012), we developed a detailed pathway model. The pathway model then guided subsequent analyses.

In order to assess variations in how teachers implement the Inspire>Aspire curriculum (**Aim 1**), trained researchers at Montclair State University conducted telephone interviews with 23 teachers who were implementing Inspire>Aspire. Quantitative measures of several key pupil outcomes including goal setting, future mindedness, sense of purpose, future aspirations, and a global measure of positive youth development were pilot tested using a matched pre-test (fall

2014)/post-test (spring 2015) design (**Aim 2**). We also examined the Inspire>Aspire theory of change using qualitative interviews with Inspire>Aspire students that were administered as a matched pre-test (fall 2014) and post-test (spring 2015) (**Aim 3**). In addition to assessing variations in how teachers implement Inspire>Aspire, we also assessed whether these implementation variations (e.g., dosage, teacher experience, use of supplemental activities) were related to the quality of the posters (the primary output of Inspire>Aspire) produced by the pupils (**Aim 4**).

The process and pilot outcome evaluation of Inspire>Aspire was conducted in Scotland and included Inspire>Aspire participating teachers and students in S2 grade level classes (12-14 year-olds) in Scotland, United Kingdom from September 2014-August 2015. A total of 32 teachers participated in online surveys of program implementation assessment, 23 of whom participated in telephone interviews and submitted their class' completed posters. A total of 123 pupils completed pre-tests and 108 did post-tests. A total of 26 pupils completed pre-program interviews and 24 provided post-program interviews.

Findings

The following section highlights the key findings from the research project as they relate to the Aims and Big Questions.

Aim 1: Assess variations in program implementation

There is a fair amount of variation in the ways in which teachers implement Inspire>Aspire. Teachers who have more experience with Inspire>Aspire tend to focus more on supplemental activities. Pupils whose teachers focused on poster activities and completed these activities almost entirely in class spent the most total number of minutes on Inspire>Aspire (807 minutes on average). Teachers who fully integrated Inspire>Aspire with the broader curriculum

tended to have pupils with higher quality posters. The language level of the template and instructions is challenging for many S2 pupils. While teachers lauded the program's flexibility, this often came from experienced teachers.

Teachers vary in what they consider to constitute the "program." Some teachers view the poster itself as the program, whereas other teachers see the program (and accompanying activities) as the process leading up to completion of the poster. In the latter, the poster is viewed as a culminating activity that reinforces the previous lessons.

Aim 2: Pilot test quantitative measures of key character outcomes

Pupils did not show significant differences between pre- and post-test on most of the quantitative measures. Some significant results were found for future aspirations. This may be due to several reasons: 1) the poor psychometric properties of the measures; the level of sophistication of the measures for this population (i.e., the measures are designed for adolescents but the pupils in this study were at the younger end of the age range; not enough time had passed for the constructs to emerge, and/or even shorter-term outcomes need to be measured (e.g., precursors to caring).

Aim 3: Validate the theory of change using qualitative interviews of youth

The qualitative results provided some support for the theory of change. Pupils often demonstrated precursors to many of the constructs that were measured but many pupils did not manifest the construct itself (e.g., caring/compassion). This indicates that shorter-term outcomes need to be added to the theory of change to capture the immediate effects of participating in Inspire>Aspire.

Some students struggled with the word 'values.' It is important to consider how important it is for students to understand what the word 'values' itself means? Is it, instead, more important for students to understand what the meaning of the values themselves are?

Aim 4: Assess the relationship between variations in program implementation (e.g., differences in dosage) and poster quality

Teachers who fully integrated Inspire>Aspire with the broader curriculum (as opposed to using it as a standalone program) tended to have pupils with higher quality posters. The highest quality posters are produced by teachers who spend significant time on poster related activities in class but do not immediately have pupils work on the poster template. Preparing the students to work on the poster by using activities that lay the foundation for the poster elements is effective. Posters are of higher quality when the poster is completed in school rather than at home.

Big Question 1: Can reflecting on and writing about the virtues espoused in the Laws of Life improve adolescent character development?

Perhaps. Evidence from quantitative measures is inconclusive. The specific outcomes of interest need to be reconsidered (perhaps looking at shorter-term outcomes or other outcomes such as self-esteem, confidence and self-reflection which emerged from the qualitative data). Qualitative evidence suggests some indications of personal growth after participating in Inspire>Aspire but it is unclear if this is due to program participation or normative maturation of the youth.

Big Question 2: What is the overarching theory of change for Inspire>Aspire: Global Citizens in the Making?

This is represented in the pathway model. Significant strides were made in articulating the theory of change. The pathway model will be revisited and revised in light of the findings.

Big Question 3: How is the theory of change best assessed?

A mixed methods approach is critical. Teacher report measures should also be used. Some quantitative measures did not have good psychometric properties and will need to be refined and/or replaced. Cognitive interviewing would help with testing and refining measures.

Big Question 4: Does preliminary evidence support the theory of change?

Some elements of the theory of change show preliminary support. Based on these findings, it is important to revisit whether earlier markers of change should be included in the theory of change. Variations in teacher implementation style have an impact on pupil poster quality. Ceiling effects were also present. Therefore, it is important to recruit a more diverse group of pupils to participate in Inspire>Aspire in order to adequately test for program effects.

Recommendations

To advance the mission of Inspire>Aspire, the REDSS Lab leadership team synthesized the findings to create design and implementation recommendations.

Create a Foundation for Success. First, the program developers should *clarify the program goal and the role of the poster*. Character Scotland should determine whether youth character development is meant to occur by simply completing the poster or whether it occurs through classroom activities that provide foundational lessons that prepare pupils to complete the poster. **Is the poster a tool that reflects student character knowledge gained from preceding classroom lessons or is poster completion itself the vehicle for character education development?** Currently, some teachers seem to understand the program goal as poster completion, with little need for intensive classroom instruction on character elements. However, the current findings raise the question of whether the program goal should be learning what's necessary *in order to* complete the poster. With this approach, the poster would be a culminating

project reflecting student learning from program participation. For teachers who spend a lot of time discussing the poster components that foster character development (including values and inspirational figures), the poster serves as a tool to complement and reinforce lessons. For teachers who simply give the posters to their students with little or no direction, simply completing the poster *is* the program. As such, there are currently two different implicit and competing program goals co-occurring. If the goal of the program is NOT only to complete the poster, the program guidelines and website should make it clear that a thoughtful approach to the preceding character content is the crux of character development. To create a foundation for programmatic success, it is critical that teachers have a shared understanding of the program goal.

Provide Best Practices to Teachers. Teachers are instrumental to the success of Inspire>Aspire, so providing them with guidance on activities and best practices is critical. The findings suggest that Character Scotland should *recruit and encourage teachers who are able to integrate Inspire>Aspire with their broader curriculum*. Findings indicate that students of teachers that used classroom time as a central implementation space to hold discussions of values, inspirational figures, and complete the poster with other course/curriculum materials had, on average, the highest percentage of posters classified as High Aspirations. Thus, utilizing class time to integrate the program is important to the program impact.

Similarly, Character Scotland should *strongly encourage teachers to not assign Inspire>Aspire activities as homework.* Findings indicate that pupils who had teachers that primarily used homework time for Inspire>Aspire work tended to have the least favorable poster quality outcomes.

When establishing teacher expectations regarding program delivery time, Character Scotland should ***strongly encourage teachers to spend about 800 minutes on implementing Inspire>Aspire***. Pupils whose teachers focused on poster activities and completed these activities almost entirely in class for about 800 minutes had the best outcomes. Character Scotland should provide guidance on how that time is best used to optimize pupil experiences.

Cultivate More Character. Once teachers are informed of the ideal structure for implementing Inspire>Aspire, the focus should turn next to content. The data suggests Character Scotland should ***advise teachers to include (more) discussions*** on character elements, ensuring pupils understand and reflect on specific character values to enhance their comprehension. Discussion can also be used to enhance other poster elements. To help facilitate these discussions, Inspire>Aspire should ***add discussion prompts to the Website,*** ensuring that all teachers, regardless of experience level, are equipped to implement successful lessons that deliver the intended objectives.

Expand Guidelines and Resources. To ensure that all teachers deliver the program content with adequate depth and pupil engagement, Character Scotland should ***provide more specific guidelines about teaching the program.*** Techniques for creating fun, engaging lessons should be shared, along with specific tips and guidelines about meeting learning objectives for each aspect of the program. To do so, ***create approach strategies for each section of the poster***. Teachers who have completed the poster program and have classroom-tested strategies may be excellent resources for compiling new resources. Moreover, gathering great lessons and strategies from prior implementers may serve as an opportunity for Character Scotland to recognize stellar teachers and foster program buy-in. Character Scotland can also ***offer guidelines on making appropriate adjustments to lessons and materials by offering***

suggestions for abridging or expanding them. Doing so helps maintain the program quality and adherence to the program goals while meeting real world demands.

Create Additional Activities. In addition to expanding classroom activities, Character Scotland should *develop additional supplemental activities that help pupils create high quality posters.* Character Scotland should *invite teachers who have customized and adapted existing materials or created their own supplemental materials to contribute to a growing database of resources*. As previously mentioned, teachers experienced in Inspire>Aspire delivery may have resources to share, which highlights their work and encourages others to use those resources in their implementation. Resources should adequately focus on all poster elements, so Character Scotland should *provide resources for each section of the poster (not just Inspirational Figures and Quotes) on the Website.*

Extend Access to Younger Participants. As the program is being delivered to younger pupils, the materials must be age- and ability-appropriate. Character Scotland should *revise the template and Website materials to be more accessible to a younger age group* by revisiting the vocabulary, reading level and specificity of directions. The newly developed and collected resources and teaching materials recommended above should also be age-appropriate to reach target pupils.

Revisit the Programmatic Theory of Change. The findings of the current study produced new insights and these should be incorporated into a revised theory of change (pathway model). To integrate these findings, the team should: *Revise the pathway model to reflect shorter-term outcomes or precursors and measure these pre-cursors*. The data suggest a number of shorter-term outcomes or precursors may be present in the program pathway, so

adding them to the model and ensuring they are sufficiently measured will allow understanding

of how the program works and better serve new generations of pupil participants.