Chapter 3
Addressing Culturally Consonant Character Development and Research

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ABSTRACT
This chapter brings into relief a culturally consonant character education approach that seeks to enhance positive outcomes (e.g. academic self-efficacy, school belonging, and civic engagement) and intercultural communication among youth of color. It highlights key epistemological weaknesses in character education research and offers up an overview of a culturally sensitive research framework to gauge culturally consonant character development programs. We argue that cultural and linguistic differences are an integral part of character development, and that educators who incorporate a culturally consonant character approach further enhance the social fabric of their class communities, strengthen communication between diverse students, and enhance civic engagement, trustworthiness, and reciprocal social relations. We also call into question key epistemological weaknesses common in traditional character education research.

INTRODUCTION
This chapter brings into relief a culturally consonant character education approach that seeks to enhance positive outcomes (e.g. academic self-efficacy, school belonging, and civic engagement) and intercultural communication among youth of color. It highlights key epistemological weaknesses in character education research and offers up an overview of a culturally sensitive research framework to gauge culturally consonant character development programs. Character education has served as a means for enriching the civic and moral development of youth in the United States (US), and it continues to resonate with policymakers, parents, and educators; in fact, 18 states codify character education legislation. An additional 18 states simply promote the value of character
development in and outside of school, and 7 states favor character education without formal legislation (Johnson, 2011). Such Aristotle-inspired character education policy draws on essential qualities (e.g. honesty, respect, and courage) that Western civilization has discerned over the ages in an effort to contour character out of corresponding acts. Emphasis is placed on engaging habits of heart and mind to craft a flourishing learner.

The need for character education is clear given recent statistics regarding academic achievement gaps, school violence, and absenteeism, (Was, Woltz, & Drew, 2006; Hinton & Olsen, 2015). Naturally, character educationists posit the idea that character development programs positively enhance youth: (a) academic achievement; (b) behavior; and (c) social outcomes (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Hinton & Johnson, 2012). Recent research advances claims that character education programs support positive youth development (e.g. Hinton & Osler, 2015; Bohning, Hodgson, Foote et al., 1998; Schultz, Barr & Selman, 2001).

Despite the documented success associated with character education, Aristotelian focused character programs put forward constricted, traditional view of character theory and practice that is grounded in Western notions of morality, whereby the moral theories and actions of non-whites are relegated to a level of depravity.

A rising cultural and linguistic milieu calls into question the practicality of traditional ideas of character education when preparing thoughtful, engaged youth for a global era. Racial/ethnic diversity is greater in the youth population than in the adult population, and these youth of color overwhelmingly reside in large urban or suburban areas (US Census, 2013). By 2018, youth of color will encompass the majority of the youth population. Current projections point toward the number of White youth enrolled in public and private schools will continue decreasing as the enrollments of Hispanic students and Asian/Pacific Islander students increase (NCES, 2015). This “browning” of youth and youth culture have emboldened educators and researchers to now argue for culturally consonant character development practices to adequately prepare this generation for participatory democratic citizenship (e.g. Green, 2004; Johnson, 2007, 2008b, 2011; Hinton & Johnson, 2012; Hinton & Osler, 2015; Siddle Walker & Snarey, 2004). These researchers systematically challenge schools to find character education approaches that: a) are inclusive without promoting assimilation, b) cultivate a sense of belonging while respecting cultural differences, and c) cherish plural cultural identities without weakening a sense of shared citizenship. Johnson (2011) further contends that such dynamic character education approaches foster cultural identity development while simultaneously reinforcing the place of youth of color in civic engagement on local, national, and global levels.

We reject character education approaches that eschew cultural and linguistic differences in the character development process. We challenge those character education theorists who argue that context dependent character is a myth. To exclude culture, race, and language from the character process leads to cultural gulfs. Cultural gulfs describe the differences that occur between members of minority and majority groups in their perceptions of belonging and their sense of freedom to express cultural distinctiveness. These cultural gulfs may shrink youth of color’s ability to develop habits of mind and heart necessary for life in civil society. The emerging literature on diversity and character education delineate that the culture and race of youth are sine qua non to the character development process. As Baldwin asserted it “is to history that we owe our frames of references, our identities, and our aspirations” (1998, p. 20). For youth of color, their characteristic spirit and historical narrative tone a distinct character perspective that systematically challenges the legitimacy and usefulness of traditional character development programs.

We argue, therefore, that cultural and linguistic differences are an integral part of character de-
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