FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS

YOUNG PEOPLE LEARN BEST THROUGH ACTIVE AND REFLECTIVE EXPERIENCES
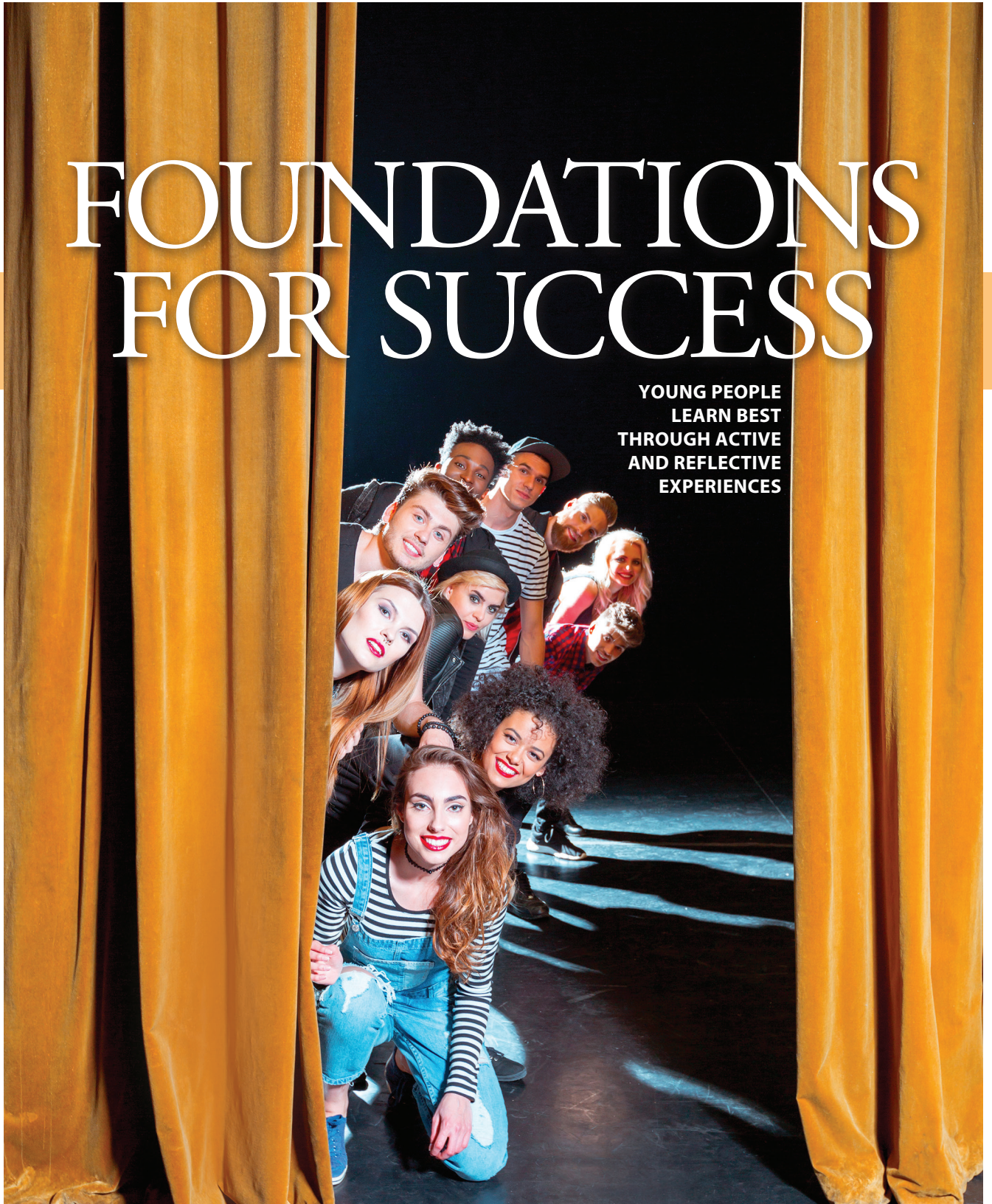
By Jenny Nagaoka

Succeeding at learning, and at life, takes more than academic ability. That's not news, but with studies on the importance of qualities like "grit" grabbing headlines, there's a growing conviction that fostering the right mindsets and social-emotional skills in students will lead to better school achievement and post-secondary success. Policymakers are eager to measure these skills and mindsets. And educators are searching for ways to teach them.

To guide that search, *Foundations for Young Adult Success,* a 2016 report by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, synthesized decades of research, theory, and practice from the fields of youth development, psychology, sociology, economics, education, and the cognitive sciences. The report describes the personal qualities that underlie a productive and fulfilling adulthood and the kind of experiences that adults can create for children, in or out of school, to lead them there.

These developmental experiences have two essential characteristics: They must be *active*, allowing students to design, create, practice, puzzle, experiment, and do. They must also be *reflective*, helping young people draw meaning from their experiences.

DEVELOPMENTAL EXPERIENCES

Youth development programs provide some of the best examples of developmental experiences and how educators can work with students to produce positive results. Mia, a Chicago high school student who was part of the study, had joined a civic action club led by her English teacher during an elective period.

At the time, Mia was a sophomore, a good student but a difficult one who antagonized teachers and picked on peers. Her teacher saw her behavior as an attempt to gain power for herself because she lacked self-esteem, a sense of belonging, and an outlet for her talents.

In the civic action club, based on a model by a local nonprofit, students identified problems in their schools or communities. Then they learned how to tackle those problems through a process that included research, data collection, brainstorming possible solutions, selecting strategies, and, once the project was complete, evaluating the results.

Developmental experiences challenge young people with novel situations, which may push them out of their comfort zones. When first asked to brainstorm problems the club might address, students resisted, their teacher recalls. "Nobody cares what we think, and nothing is going to change," the more vocal ones told her.

Mia didn't participate at first or even appear to pay much attention. She explained later that she was used to teachers lecturing, but this one "actually wanted us to en-

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gage with her. That was weird, so I reacted a little negatively."

To introduce the students to civic action, the teacher had them interview peers throughout the school to find out what neighborhoods they came from and illustrate their findings on a map. Then they discussed why it might be hard to build a sense of community at a school that drew from such a wide geographic area. That first small project engaged them, and their anger began to subside, their teacher recalled.

When the 10-week elective club was over, students including Mia wanted to continue it after school. In an early victory, the club convinced the local school council to let students have a voice in selecting the new principal and then designed a process for doing so.

"I felt valued," Mia recalled. "[Students] felt like their voice mattered."

KEYS TO CHANGE

Developmental experiences like the civic action club help young people to develop three key factors that lead to education, and career attainment, civic engagement, and healthy relationships. These are a sense of *agency*, or being able to take action and set a course for their lives, *competencies* that allow them to perform tasks well, and an *integrated identity*, which is a clear sense of self that allows a person to choose actions consistent with their values, beliefs, and goals.

As Mia became more involved with the club, she found her "mean girl" attitude at odds with her new identity as a civic leader.

"Being involved in your community and being a leader, you can't be this brat," she explained. "You have to be open-minded and respectful and kind. I had to change if I wanted to make changes in my community."

When Mia became the club's president her senior year, she underwent a particularly intense period of reflection and growth. At first, leading was a struggle. At meetings, she rushed through the agenda without pausing for anyone's in-

FOUNDATIONS FOR YOUNG ADULT SUCCESS: A DEVELOPMENTAL FRAMEWORK

The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, June 2015

University of Chicago researchers describe the elements that children need for adult success. Download the report at **www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Foundations-for-Young-Adult-Success.pdf**

put. She found it difficult to relinquish control, even over the colors in the handmade posters.

"She was really frustrated," her teacher recalls. "She felt she was a bad leader."

The teacher said that her role wasn't to jump in and rescue Mia but to stand on the side and coach her, "helping her to reflect on what went wrong and how to adapt. Kids have to fail and learn from their failures. It builds perseverance."

As Mia honed her leadership skills, she said she came to see herself as someone who could solve problems, work with people she didn't agree with, and bounce back from failures.

Developmental experiences aren't only for personal growth. They can be a deeply engaging way to teach academic skills and the kind of 21st-century skills employers are seeking, like analytic thinking, collaboration, communication, and creative problem solving. Students

in the civic action club analyzed social science research, designed surveys, conducted interviews, wrote persuasively, and presented their reasoning publicly. One of Mia's favorite projects was convincing the local school council to overturn a hated uniform policy with an argument based on teacher interviews, a student survey, and other research.

Many youth and after-school programs teach academic skills in ways that engage kids — conducting science experiments, writing the school newspaper, building robots, performing in a play. Some classrooms also emphasize hands-on or collaborative learning. What elevates these activities to developmental experiences is the depth of the engagement and the opportunity for reflection.

For kids to become deeply involved in learning, they need challenging, open-ended tasks that require them to think outside the box and grapple with difficult problems. They also need to be able to make choices about their activities and how to carry them out. Many psychologists see autonomy as a basic need, and research finds that it is also critical to building self-regulation, values, and agency.

As young people carry out their activities, they need the opportunity to practice, fall short, get feedback, and try again. In school, by contrast, assignments are often quickly evaluated without a chance to redo and improve work with coaching from the teacher.

Work also needs to be meaningful to students and have value for others, which builds their confidence, their own values, and sense of agency. Some teachers have found ways to build public service projects into the curriculum.

As students dive into complex projects, they also need a chance to reflect on their experiences so that they can gain useful meanings from them. Mia might have concluded from the club meetings that went poorly that she didn't have the ability to lead, but instead her teacher guided the reflection in a way that helped her see an opportunity for improvement.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Young people learn best when adults design experiences that allow for action and reflection. Active experiences allow students to:	Reflection helps young people solidify what they have learned and make sense of their experience. Adults can guide young people to:

- **Encounter** novel situations and more capable peers and adults who serve as role models;

- **Tinker** — test, discover, design, puzzle, build, experiment, create, play, and imagine;

- **Choose** activities, companions, goals, and ways of presenting themselves;

- **Practice** and receive feedback that helps them develop competence; and

- **Contribute** to the world in ways that they find meaningful and that others value.

- **Describe and evaluate** their lives, feelings, thoughts, and experiences;

- **Connect** new experiences and ideas to what they already know;

- **Envision** themselves in the future, seeing positive images of what they want to become and negative images of what they want to avoid becoming; and

- **Integrate** the insights, skills, or other lessons from an experience into a larger sense of themselves.

IMPERATIVE TO SUCCESS

Ensuring all young people have access to a multitude of rich developmental experiences is imperative to their success. While research can provide a framework about the kinds of experiences young people need to grow into a rich and satisfying adulthood, it doesn't yet provide all the details. It's not yet clear what specific strategies educators should adopt to teach academic content in a way that also fosters personal growth. Designing such instruction will require innovation and time for developmental experiences, much like those we want for young people — time to design, create, test out, make mistakes, reflect, and revise.

We have also seen the demand for measures of qualities like grit far outpacing the state of the field of measurement. This creates great potential for these measures to be ineffective or to otherwise lead practitioners down a fruitless path. It is prudent for district leaders to proceed cautiously with incorporating noncognitive measures into school accountability systems. Understanding how best to measure noncognitive factors in a meaningful way that has real potential to improve practice takes time.

In an age when accountability is a dominant way of managing schools, the tolerance for mistakes is very small. For real shifts to happen in educational practice, practitioners need support from school and district leadership, as well as safe spaces to experiment and learn. Further, this is not an endeavor that can be undertaken by schools or adults acting alone. It will require parallel efforts to rethink what policies and structures are needed to provide opportunities to children and youth; support adults who raise, teach, or care for young people; and facilitate coordination and learning across sectors.

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