

## THE CHARACTER CATALYST

### Strengthening Character Through Outdoor Experiential Learning





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2025, Outward Bound International (OBI), in collaboration with Penn State University, the University of Utah, and Clemson University, and supported by the John Templeton Foundation, completed a multi-year global research initiative to better understand how outdoor experiential learning influences character development.

The study identified consistent, culturally responsive ways Outward Bound Schools

worldwide cultivate character in young people. The resulting framework provides a shared foundation for improving outcomes and enhancing program effectiveness across the global network.

This pioneering study builds on OBI's legacy of using adventure, challenge, service, and reflection to shape lives.





# 1. BACKGROUND

## OUTWARD BOUND INTERNATIONAL (OBI)

**Outward Bound International is the global coordinating body that supports, strengthens, and expands the network of Outward Bound Schools worldwide. It ensures high standards in educational quality and risk management, fosters collaboration, leads research, and protects the integrity of the Outward Bound mission and brand.**

## CHARACTER DEFINED

Outward Bound began in 1941 as part of Kurt Hahn's education reform movement. While the language has evolved - we no longer use terms like character training, self-concept, and personal development - the core purpose remains unchanged.

In our recent global research initiative supported by the John Templeton Foundation, we identified 'character' as a unifying concept across cultures. The definitions and approaches used in this study draw primarily from the work of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue in the United Kingdom, alongside influential perspectives from philosopher Jason Baehr. We focused on four key domains of character that strongly reflect Outward Bound's core outcomes:

**PERFORMANCE CHARACTER - Resilience, self-confidence**

**MORAL CHARACTER - Compassion for others, social competence**

**CIVIC CHARACTER - Environmental responsibility, service**

**INTELLECTUAL CHARACTER - Reflection, curiosity, creativity**

These qualities are developed through skilled educators, challenging experiences, and Outward Bound's People, Places, and Process framework. The "3Ps framework" refers to the distinctive, interdependent elements that define an Outward Bound program. Together, the 3Ps create the conditions for maximum impact, fostering personal and social development through meaningful, transformative experiences which aim to develop outcomes related to connection to self (resilience and self-confidence), connection to others (social competence and compassion), and connection to the natural world (environmental responsibility).

Since its inception in 1941, Outward Bound has focused on character as a central goal, though terminology and emphasis may vary across cultures.



## PROCESS IN ACTION

### ALIGNING CHARACTER CONCEPTS WITH OUTWARD BOUND OUTCOMES

Linking character concepts to Outward Bound's core outcomes shows how different aspects of character drive personal and social development.

#### PERFORMANCE CHARACTER:

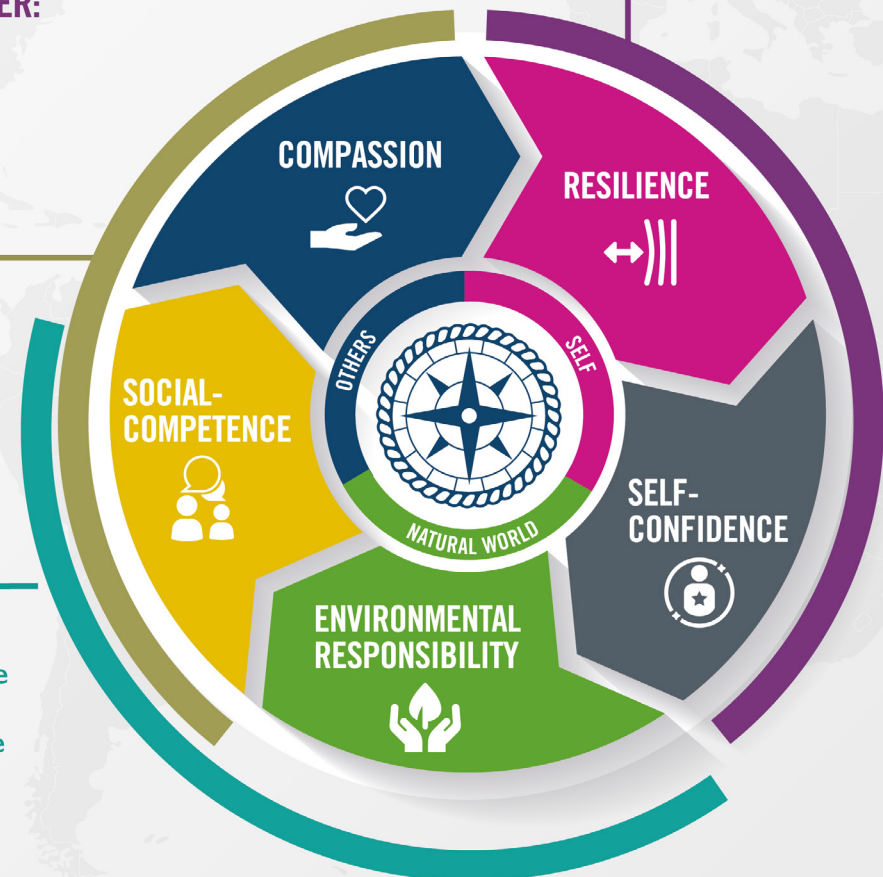
This is about doing one's best, showing diligence, perseverance, and a growth mindset.

#### MORAL CHARACTER:

Involves empathy, courage, honesty, and fairness, and acting well in situations that require integrity and respect.

#### CIVIC CHARACTER:

Involves being a responsible citizen, and having a commitment to the welfare of others, community, society and the environment.



## 2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to build a shared, evidence-based theoretical framework for character development that respects local contexts while identifying common practices with high impact across the OB network.

### KEY GOALS:

- Understand how character development is operationalized across cultures
- Identify program design and instructional approaches that enhance character outcomes
- Offer Outward Bound Schools a practical and adaptable framework to further improve practice.





# 3.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

### THE EISENHARDT METHOD

The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map, based on data from the World Values Survey (WVS), was used to select Outward Bound (OB) Schools from culturally diverse regions. By choosing at least one School from each of the eight world cultural regions defined by WVS, the researchers could compare OB Schools to their national cultural contexts. A multiple-case study methodology was used to examine 11 OB Schools, selected to represent variation across culture, size, age, and format (e.g., center-based, expeditionary).

#### The research design involved:

- Global staff surveys and cultural alignment mapping
- Field observations across 11 Schools reflective of the Inglehart-Weitzel World Cultural Map
- Interviews and focus groups with students, staff, and alumni
- Innovative tools such as photovoice (a participatory research method that empowers individuals to capture and share their experiences and perspectives through photographs) and embedded co-researchers.

The study also leveraged the OBI People, Places, Process (PPP) framework to frame data collection and analysis.

## 4. DIFFERENCES ACROSS CONTEXTS

The study found that Outward Bound Schools universally aim to develop character, but they do so differently based on:



**LOCAL VALUES  
AND CULTURAL  
EXPECTATIONS**



**GEOGRAPHY AND  
ACCESS TO NATURE**



**CLIENT PRIORITIES  
AND FUNDING  
STRUCTURES**



**ORGANIZATIONAL  
SIZE AND STAFFING  
MODELS**

These differences impact which character strengths are prioritized and how program “levers” are adjusted.

## 5. FINDINGS: THE FIVE LEVERS

Researchers use the analogy of a musical mixing board to illustrate how Outward Bound course designers adjust various “levers” to shape character development. Just as a sound engineer adapts inputs to create the right sound for a particular audience, OB educators adapt course elements to suit their students and context.

These levers vary across the network, allowing each School to remain both relevant and effective. While all are creating “music,” the instruments and arrangements differ. When thoughtfully adjusted, these levers bring consistency to program design and enhance character development outcomes.

1. EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY
2. AUTHENTIC ADVENTURE
3. SERVICE
4. EDUCATIONAL MODELS
5. INSTRUCTOR BEHAVIOURS



New Zealand 



## 1. EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

A clear, shared philosophy that aligns with the School's core values amplifies program consistency and impact. When program activities, educational models, and staff interactions align with the educational philosophy of a School, they are more effective.

## 2. AUTHENTIC ADVENTURE

Researchers found that as authentic adventure increased, so did students' capacity for character development. Authentic adventure involves immersive, meaningful challenges that push individuals to the edge of their capabilities. It takes place in real-world environments with natural consequences for both participants and instructors, requiring physical and emotional engagement.

## 3. SERVICE

Researchers observed that when Service is meaningfully and thoughtfully integrated into programs to cultivate empathy, civic-mindedness, and a sense of responsibility toward others and the environment, character development is enhanced for students. In the Outward Bound context, Service to others is a cornerstone of fostering personal growth, social responsibility, and community engagement. It stands alongside adventure, reflection, and personal development as a core tenet of Outward Bound's historical roots.

## 4. EDUCATIONAL MODELS

Researchers observed that the intentional application of appropriate educational models increases meaningful learning and character development opportunities.

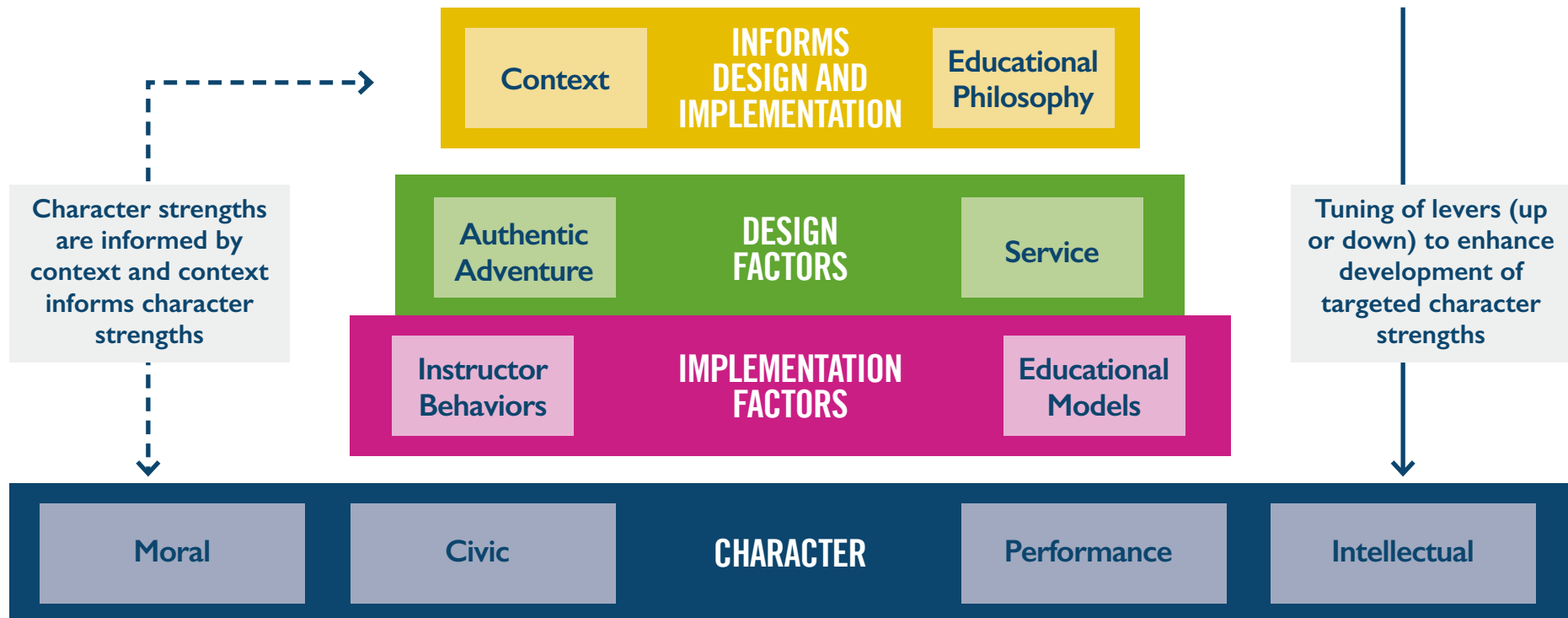
Educational Models serve as guides for designing teaching and learning. An appropriate model matches student needs and aligns with the context. The adaptability of these models is a significant strength, allowing for contextualization across diverse participant groups, cultural settings, and program environments.

## 5. INSTRUCTOR BEHAVIOURS

Researchers observed specific instructional behaviours that appeared to enhance opportunities for character development. Behaviours were categorized into three types: Course Culture, Structures for Learning, and Adaptability. Skilled, adaptable instructors build trust, set culture, and customize learning in real-time, shaping the emotional and social tone of the course.

## 6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study produced a dynamic framework linking context, course design, and instructional practice to the four key character domains, and positioning educational philosophy and School context as the foundation for “tuning” other program levers.





## CALL TO ACTION



This research affirms Outward Bound's potential to serve as a powerful catalyst for character development. Outward Bound International invites educators, funders, researchers, and Schools across the network to use this framework not only as a tool for reflection but as a springboard for innovation, deeper impact, and sustained growth

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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