

Chapter 6

Discovering Identity and Purpose in the Classroom: Theoretical, Empirical, and Applied Perspectives



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Abstract Identity formation has long been considered a crucial developmental task that evolves into a deep sense of purpose. As many adolescents spend the majority of their waking hours within the school context, there is great potential to boost both identity and purpose through the educational setting—via curriculum and instruction, extracurricular opportunities, school climate and culture, purpose development classes, and guidance from teachers. This chapter reviews the theoretical foundations and empirical evidence for expecting links between identity and purpose. The challenges, opportunities, and benefits of addressing identity and purpose within the school context are also discussed. An innovative charter school program is unpacked as an illustration of how identity and purpose might be effectively fostered in the classroom. Conclusions and implications are examined in light of cultural sensitivity, diversity, and inclusion.

Keywords Identity · Purpose · Schools · Education · Purpose Learning

Identity formation has long been considered a quintessential life aim and developmental task that is particularly relevant to adolescents, largely because of the deep sense of purpose that theoretically evolves out of a strong understanding of self-identity (Erikson, 1968). Purpose itself is also a fundamental aspect of youth development and well-being (Damon, 2008; Ryff, 1989), dovetailing with other important changes in adolescence such as greater sophistication in diverse socioemotional and cognitive competencies (e.g., empathy, moral reasoning, self-regulation, autonomy) that enable and are linked with various characteristics that reflect both a sense of purpose as well as identity (e.g., volunteering, community involvement, civic engagement) (Metzger et al., 2018). Practically speaking, given that many adolescents spend

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the majority of their waking hours within the school context (Stepick & Stepick, 2002), there is great potential to tap into this crucial developmental period and boost identity and purpose through the educational setting—via curriculum and instruction, extracurricular opportunities, changes to school climate and culture, purpose development classes, and relationships and guidance from teachers and school staff.

The present chapter discusses opportunities to promote youth development by unpacking the critical convergence of identity, purpose, and school. We begin by building an understanding of developmentally-relevant processes by briefly reviewing the theoretical foundations for expecting close links between identity and purpose among youth. The potential challenges and opportunities in addressing identity and purpose within the school context, including basic and applied research evidence that supports the benefits of doing so, will be next discussed. An innovative in-school program will be provided as an illustration of how identity and purpose can be intentionally and effectively fostered in the classroom and within the educational system. We conclude by discussing implications, as well as further opportunities to move forward. Our overall approach incorporates the importance of considering cultural sensitivity and inclusion, as well as the unique processes and mechanisms that might be found among youth from ethnically diverse groups and immigrant backgrounds.

6.1 Defining the Construct of Purpose

Many scholars and practitioners acknowledge purpose as a key developmental virtue and character strength that encompasses a deep sense of self-actualization, flourishing, and a solid understanding of what individuals would like to accomplish with their lives (Kiang & Witkow, 2015; Malin, Reilly, Quinn, & Moran, 2014; Seligman, 2002). However, precise conceptualizations of purpose have varied in the psychological literature. For example, some researchers have focused on its role as a unique dimension of subjective well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Others have employed definitions that view purpose as interchangeable with meaning in life (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009). Notable approaches have also attempted to delineate different aspects of purpose, such as its presence versus search (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), or in terms of the content of an individual's purpose in addition to an individual's purpose commitment (Hill, Burrow, & Sumner, 2013; Burrow, O'Dell, & Hill, 2010). Some conceptual perspectives, especially among those that focus on adolescents, argue that purpose involves intentions and goals that are both personal and of consequence to the world outside of the self (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). Scholars have increasingly rallied around framing purpose as both a future-directed goal that is personally meaningful and aimed at contributing to something larger than the self (e.g., Malin et al., 2014). The current chapter largely adopts this latter perspective and considers purpose as both an inward and outward facing motivational driving force that shapes well-being and behavior.

Consistent with this view, purpose must clearly be personally meaningful and central to one's identity (Hill et al., 2013), given its powerful role in directing and organizing life goals, activities, and actions (Damon, 2008; Emmons, 1999; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Moran, 2017; Ryff, 1989). Indeed, all conceptualizations of purpose, however diverse, point to the developmental importance of its existence, especially for adolescents who are often forming foundations of purpose while also maturing in both self-views and in other important physical, social, and cognitive ways. For example, among cross-sectional and longitudinal samples, and among youth from ethnically diverse and immigrant backgrounds, greater purpose in life has been associated with a host of positive outcomes including lower depressive symptoms and negative affect, and higher self-esteem, personal agency, life satisfaction, positive affect, and academic adjustment (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009; Burrow, O'Dell, & Hill, 2010; Kiang & Witkow, 2015). Purpose has also been shown to be protective, perhaps boosting resilience to help individuals cope with stressors and life challenges (Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2011; Frankl, 1959). In light of these empirically-validated links, one understudied question is how youth purpose can be cultivated. Theoretically, identity formation appears to be one promising pathway to consider.

6.2 Theoretical Perspectives Linking Identity and Purpose

Theoretical perspectives have long linked identity and purpose. The current chapter centers on two major models proposed in the psychological literature, Eriksonian and Social Identity Theory, each of which establish these links and are particularly relevant in terms of youth development.

Erikson's psychosocial theory with identity crisis leading to self/purpose. Erikson's (1959) psychosocial theory of human development puts forth eight stages or conflicts that are developmentally-relevant across different periods of the lifespan. During the period of adolescence, the relevant conflict or crisis focuses on the struggle between Identity versus Role Diffusion (Erikson, 1968). According to the model, adolescents are challenged with finding ways in which their identities are unique and distinct from other people around them or risk failing to establish a firm understanding of oneself. A successful resolution to this conflict is characterized by a strong sense of identity, from which evolves a commitment to the self and the development of life purpose as a virtue. Once adolescents develop a sense of who they are, they can then use their sense of identity to live a more agentic or purposeful life. In Erikson's words, "We are what we love". Drawing on his model, who we are is what we love and what we love is what drives us and gives our life meaning and purpose.

The theoretical premise that identity development precedes purpose has been empirically supported. For example, among a sample of Asian American adolescents, ethnic identity has been longitudinally associated with self-reported purpose one year later, and not the other way around, providing support for Erikson's model (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). Drawing on both Eriksonian ideas and Côté's (1997) identity capital

model, Burrow and Hill (2011) similarly found that purpose in life manifests from a sense of identity and, together, both purpose and identity contribute to well-being and positive youth development.

Although adolescence is one developmental period that is most directly relevant to purpose, it is important to recognize that identity is a constantly evolving process and there is always the possibility of encountering experiences that shape one's sense of self at all developmental periods (Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Phinney, 2003). Hence, to the extent that identity is intricately tied to purpose, there are chances for growth and further differentiation beyond adolescence and across the entire lifespan and in ways that Erikson did not originally address. For example, much of the literature in this area has focused on older adolescents, college students, and the period of emerging or young adulthood more generally (Damon, 2008). As illustrated through a study on emerging adults (Bundick, 2011), reflecting on and discussing one's purpose in life was longitudinally related to greater levels of purpose as defined by goal directedness which, in turn, contributed to greater life satisfaction. Moreover, in directly addressing the limitation that much of the field's understanding of purpose post-adolescence has relied on college student and well-educated adult samples, Sumner (2017) found that overall levels of purpose did not significantly vary according to the reported education levels of adults; however, some corollaries of purpose (e.g., agency) were significantly higher among adults who reported attaining higher levels of education. Beyond adolescence, opportunities therefore abound in terms of better understanding why and how identity and purpose can continue to evolve and flourish, whether through exploratory experiences in higher education, and/or real-world experiences such as in work or community settings.

Theoretically, the collective experiences that culminate from adolescence through adulthood could come to a head in later stages in Erikson's model, which also implicate salient links between identity and purpose. For example, the Generativity versus Stagnation stage points to the importance of laying the foundation for role fulfillment and of committing to personally meaningful and outward facing goals. Particularly relevant among older adults, individuals must evaluate whether they have sufficiently made their mark on the world (e.g., caring for others, accomplishing goals, engaging with the community, creating a better world) or whether they have failed to find a way to contribute to something outside of the self (Ehlman & Ligon, 2012). Again, such processes invoke the idea that a deep sense of purpose remains a vital component of overall life satisfaction and well-being that is relevant across the entire lifespan and, as such, is highly interdependent with one's continually developing sense of self and identity (Erikson, 1950; Hill & Burrow, 2012; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992).

Tajfel's social identity theory with group identity leading to purpose, commitment, and group maintenance. Social identity refers to the knowledge, value, and emotional significance attributed to group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 2001). Having a strong sense of social identity, or perceiving oneself as tied to a group, can contribute to a psychological sense of togetherness, we-ness, or belongingness (Turner, 1982). In turn, the group membership and affiliation that come from feeling closely connected to one's group can provide youth with a sense of purpose and meaning (Fuligni, 2010), and manifest through behavioral goals and attitudes that

are purposeful (e.g., imbued with personal meaning) and supportive of the group (e.g., outward-facing).

Using the family as an example of one specific group that is highly salient to many adolescents, theoretical and empirical work suggests that family identity can operate in ways that promote a sense of purpose (Fuligni & Flook, 2005). Indeed, culturally-relevant constructs stemming broadly from principles of familism suggest that purpose can be embodied through family obligation, or attitudes and behaviors that endorse the importance of assisting, supporting, and respecting the family in the interest of maintaining one's family stability and well-being (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002). In a daily diary study, day-to-day activities related to family connectedness, for example, helping take care of siblings or running errands for the family, as compared to purely hedonic or leisure activities, such as watching television or playing video games, were associated with higher levels of daily reported purpose (Kiang, 2012).

More broadly, a social identity perspective would also suggest that social group membership can contribute to a sense of group solidarity and collective action, perhaps paving the way towards not only meaningful action in support of one's specific group, but also for more general social movements and political engagement (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). Such pathways are also consistent with the Rejection-Identification Model (RIM; Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999) which argues that experiences of rejection or group threat (e.g., discrimination based on one's social group membership) could promote identification with the rejected group(s). In turn, the strengthening of group identity can ultimately enhance psychological adjustment by allowing individuals to maintain self-esteem and sense of belonging (e.g., Brittan et al., 2015; Cronin et al., 2012; Tabbah et al., 2016), perhaps through the means of developing a sense of purpose and engagement to directly combat such initial threat. Empirical links between ethnic identity and civic engagement have been indeed found among U.S. adults from immigrant backgrounds (Stepick & Stepick, 2002). Flanagan, Syvertsen, Gill, Gallay, and Cumsille (2009) found similar evidence among adolescents in that greater ethnic awareness, which can be seen as a marker of social identity, is associated with greater civic commitments, such as the reported importance of improving race relations and of advocating for or supporting one's ethnic group. Hence, both conceptual models and emerging empirical work support the idea that identity and purpose, as reflected through collective action and social and civic engagement, can be bolstered in the face of marginalization and ultimately serve to promote youth development as well as potentially buffer against the negative impact of such socially challenging experiences.

From theory to application. Taken together, classic developmental mechanisms that suggest that a sense of purpose emerges from identity formation, and views from social identity theory arguing that group connectedness can initiate positive attitudes and purposeful action in support of one's group, reflect just two conceptual reasons for why we might expect identity and purpose to be intricately linked. Given that adolescence is a prime time for the simultaneous formation of both identity and purpose (Damon et al., 2003; Hill et al., 2013), it is important to think about the primary influences within this period and specific ways that both constructs can be promoted. Purpose can be shaped by social context (Liang, White, Mousseau,

Hasse, Knight, Berado, & Lund, 2017); hence, opportunities and benefits abound in terms of exploring how parents, teachers, practitioners, and adolescents' broader community and educational settings might contribute to youth purpose and identity development.

Notably, while early socialization experiences take place in the microenvironment of the home, adolescents spend intensive and prolonged periods of engagement within the educational context, which is one of the most important factors that shape the lives of youth (Stepick & Stepick, 2002). For example, academics aside, schools constitute key settings that provide adolescents with the opportunity to engage in socioemotional learning as well as identity exploration and development (Tseng & Seidman, 2007). Moreover, within the school context, adolescents learn formally and programmatically, but also informally through peer relations, extracurriculars, and out-of-classroom experiences (Hughes, Watford, & Del Toro, 2016). Adolescents' engagement within the school context can therefore occur not only within the scope of academic activities and actual school hours, but also in light of structured experiences within the school (e.g., student clubs, sports) (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). Research has increasingly highlighted the importance of organized activities among out-of-school contexts in also shaping adolescent development (e.g. Bohnert, Fredricks, & Randall, 2010; Larson, 2000). That said, we next turn to a more focused and applied discussion on how a broad conceptualization of the school setting can play an impactful role in youth purpose and identity formation before providing one concrete example of an innovative school curriculum that aims to foster these constructs among students.

6.3 Sociocontextual Promoters of Purpose and Applied Empirical Evidence

The theoretical background indicating that purpose develops according to the social contexts a young person experiences is increasingly supported by empirical evidence. Some constructs that can be seen as indicators or correlates of purpose (e.g., moral identity, meaning in life) are clearly influenced by contextual factors such as family environment, community, and institutional settings (e.g., Hardy, Walker, Olsen, Woodbury, & Hickman, 2014; Steger, Bundick, & Yeager, 2011). For example, prosocial and civic development—indicated by prosocial attitudes and behaviors and suggestive of adolescents' developing moral identity—are predicted by family, community, and peer socialization (e.g., Atkins & Hart, 2003; Carlo, Knight, McGinley, & Hayes, 2011; da Silva, Sanson, Smart, & Toumbourou, 2004; Rossi, Lenzi, Sharkey, Vieno, & Santinello, 2016). Meaning in life, similarly, can vary according to parental factors, religious affiliation and support, and support from non-family significant others (Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2013; Dunn & O'Brien, 2009; Newton & McIntosh, 2013).

There are fewer studies demonstrating the influence of the developmental ecology on purpose specifically, but the research in this area is growing. Findings from youth purpose research about the ways that adults structure developmental contexts to nurture purpose can directly inform our understanding of the role that schools might play in supporting adolescent purpose development. There are likely multiple pathways and mechanisms involved, which have yet to be firmly established, but the literature suggests that schools (e.g., teachers and other purpose role models within the school setting, programs within the school that motivate critical thinking and personal engagement and growth, peer influences through friendships and organized activities) can provide the scaffolding for youth to both discover and build new purposes, as well as refine an already existing sense of purpose (e.g., Gutowski, White, Liang, Diamonti, & Berado, 2018; Liang et al., 2017; Malin, Ballard, & Damon, 2015; Malin, Liauw, & Remington, 2019; Moran, Bundick, Malin, & Reilly, 2013).

The affective context that adults create for young people at school might be an important factor in whether and how school serves as a setting that supports purpose development. The potential relevance of affective environment to purpose development is suggested in at least two studies, which show that parent/child relationships characterized by positive attachment and trust are associated with a greater sense of purpose and purpose commitment among their adolescent children, whereas relationships characterized by alienation are associated with lower purpose commitment (Blattner, Liang, Lund, & Spencer, 2013; Hill, Burrow, & Sumner, 2016). These studies suggest that providing young people a school environment where they can trust adults and feel a sense of belonging may be most conducive to purpose development.

Adults can further provide a purpose-supporting context for adolescents by acting as purpose role models and mentors, suggesting that schools can foster student purpose by preparing adults in the school to take on these roles. “People” was one of the essential elements of purpose development that emerged in a qualitative study with highly purposeful adolescents, with important support coming from adults who provided purpose affirmation and guidance (Liang et al., 2017). Another study found that it was not just the presence or quantity of mentors that predicted purpose development among college students, but the quality of mentorship they experienced, indicated by the students’ perception of the mentor relationship as mutual, empathic, authentic, and empowering (Lund, Liang, Konowitz, White, & Mousseau, 2019). Finally, among adolescents in an interview study of purpose development, some of those who described being strongly committed to a beyond-the-self purpose said that they had teachers who mentored them in their purpose by responding to, encouraging, and suggesting pathways they could take to pursue their personal interests (Moran et al., 2013). In the same study, adult and peer role models of prosocial activity and purpose appeared to support adolescents in developing their own purpose.

Of particular relevance to school-based purpose development efforts is research suggesting that institutional settings can provide integrated sources of purpose support. Moran et al. (2012) found that some highly purposeful adolescents received multiple, integrated forms of support for their purpose in community-based or church-based youth groups. These young people described the emotional encouragement and

social network that youth organizations provided, the training and material resources needed for pursuing purpose, and opportunities to act on purpose goals. Schools are similarly positioned to provide an integrated web of support for purpose. Although this web of school-based support has not been directly investigated, at least one other study with young adolescents suggests that some schools might provide a more purpose-conducive culture or ecology than others (Malin et al., 2019). In that study, certain resources that middle school students reported having access to in the school environment (e.g., classroom activities related to purpose goals and adult role models at school) correlated with purpose, measured as beyond-the-self life goal orientation (i.e., selecting beyond-the-self oriented life goals over self-oriented life goals) and purpose goal commitment (i.e., engagement in pursuing selected goals). In particular, purpose goal commitment was associated with students' perception that their school assignments helped them pursue their important goals. However, the effects of those specific perceived resources were small compared to the differences in purpose scores across the seven school sites (Malin, Liauw, & Remington, 2019). For example, students at one school scored significantly higher on beyond-the-self goal orientation and on goal commitment compared to students from all other schools, while at another school students scored significantly lower on these measures than their counterparts in all of the other schools. This suggests that a more holistic approach to supporting purpose development at school—for example, by creating an environment of trust, providing purpose mentors, engaging students in identity and purpose exploration, and providing opportunities for students to act on their purpose—might be more effective than small interventions that target just one aspect of purpose support. Indeed, research has yet to systematically isolate specific predictors of purpose, and perhaps a more whole, integrated approach would be particularly worthwhile in understanding what mechanisms and resources might be involved.

6.4 School-Based Interventions to Support Purpose Development

Although it may be that comprehensive sources of support are more effective than targeted interventions for developing student purpose, there are a few school-based interventions that have been evaluated and shown to have modest success. These interventions offer insight into the outcomes that might be expected to result from targeted efforts to encourage purpose development. Engaging students in a semi-structured interview about the things that matter most to them, their life goals, and the motivations driving their most important goals and activities—that is, the aspects of life that would indicate purpose—resulted in gains in life satisfaction and goal-directedness, but did not directly influence sense of purpose (Bundick, 2011). Another intervention sought to foster purpose among high school students by engaging them in bimonthly discussions about their aspirations, followed by sessions dedicated to

planning and acting on their postsecondary purpose (Pizzolato, Brown, & Kanny, 2011). The evaluation showed that it had a positive effect on purpose in life as well as internal locus of control for academic achievement.

One important potential contributor to students' purpose and identity development is the school culture and climate they experience. As was noted above, students benefit from an environment where they experience trusting relationships with adults and a sense of belonging. A similar effect was seen specifically in students' school experiences in a study showing that a sense of feeling connected at school was associated with stronger future-orientation (Crespo, Jose, Kielpikowski, & Prior, 2013). In another series of studies, greater sense of belonging was associated with higher sense of meaning in life and better ability to articulate a meaning for life, and experiments designed to enhance sense of belonging predicted an increase in the sense that life has meaning (Lambert et al., 2013).

6.5 School-Based Purpose Learning Programs

A number of purpose learning programs have emerged in recent years that are grounded in the research on adolescent purpose development (Malin, 2018). These programs, most of which are created by external organizations (e.g., non-profits), provide curricula and teacher professional development designed in part to support student purpose development. Recognizing that purpose does not develop in isolation but requires a foundation of social and emotional capacities, these programs aim to develop self-awareness, empathy, civic engagement, innovation, and future-mindedness, among other strengths, along with purpose. For example, Mastering Our Skills and Inspiring Character (MOSAIC), a program created for middle school students by the Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab at Rutgers, aims to build the virtue of noble purpose by helping students learn skills such as effective communication and emotion regulation (Hatchimonji, Linsky, & Elias, 2017). In the MOSAIC model, noble purpose is theorized as a superordinate goal that organizes subordinate goals, and those subordinate goals are supported through the socioemotional skills and character traits developed through MOSAIC lessons and activities. Using an entirely different approach, Quaglia Institute builds purpose by supporting teachers to develop a sense of leadership and the confidence to take action, thereby preparing teachers to share these capacities with their students and model purpose in their classrooms (Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations, 2016).

These programs, though diverse in their approaches, suggest a curriculum framework for schools that want to support student identity and purpose development (Malin, 2018). This framework is made up of the following four components: (1) values exploration and self-awareness, (2) social awareness and beyond-the-self thinking, (3) future-oriented goal setting and planning, and (4) taking action. Notably, growth in self and identity are inexorably threaded within all of the following components of the purpose learning framework.

The first part of the purpose learning framework is self-awareness. In this component, students (and in some cases, teachers) engage in activities such as values reflection, identity exploration, discussion of deep and meaningful questions, and sharing their voice in the classroom. Trust is an essential precursor to any of these activities, and a critical element of this component is building a sense of safety and belonging for all students prior to and through self-awareness activities in the classroom. By exploring values, meaning, and identity openly in a classroom environment that is psychologically safe, the expectation is that students and teachers together can develop confidence, compassion, and human connection that provides a foundation for exploring purpose.

The second part of the purpose learning framework is social awareness, or an awareness and understanding of self in the world. Social awareness is developed through activities that engage students in looking outward and reflecting on their role in the community, society, and the world. Students might discuss social responsibility or explore issues in their community that cause them to feel concerned. Some purpose learning programs engage students in thinking about the people in their lives who are resources for their own development, especially those people who can support them as they pursue their life goals. Other programs ask students to teach or mentor each other, explore personal values together, or collaborate on social projects. In all of these ways, it is hoped that students can build their awareness of and connection to the social world and gain the capacity to make meaningful contributions to that social world. In answering these questions, students begin to articulate goals that might give them a sense of purpose.

The third part of the framework is goal setting and planning. In these purpose learning programs, students practice thinking about higher level goals that they want to pursue and plotting the steps they need to take to pursue these goals. They are asked to reflect on questions such as: What kind of person do I want to be? What do I want my life to contribute? And, how do I want to make a difference in my community or in the world? The answers to these questions can provide the seeds of shorter-term purposeful projects as well as future-oriented purposeful life goals. Goal setting in a purpose learning program includes developing the capacity to plan and act on higher-order goals, such as self-regulation skills and the ability to set small-step short term goals.

Finally, this purpose learning framework includes a component on taking action to accomplish goals. Typically, the action component follows from goal setting and builds on self-awareness and social-awareness, and has the student identifying a concern or interest that is personally meaningful and a need in the world that they can act on. However, it is also possible for self-awareness and social-awareness to follow from action, as students are given opportunities to pursue meaningful projects and asked to reflect on the experience. The actions that students take in purpose learning programs are generally age-appropriate, and might include collaborative school-improvement projects, civic action in the student's community, an internship at a local business, or any other opportunity that results in real-world participation that integrates what matters to the student with a need in the world.

Specific classrooms, schools, and school systems have been gravitating towards adopting essential elements of a purpose learning framework and towards educating the whole child more generally (Stafford-Brizard, 2016). We provide a glimpse into one school system's efforts to intentionally foster youth purpose through a comprehensive, systematic curriculum and innovative student learning experiences to illustrate the promise and effectiveness of implementing such purpose learning approaches to adolescents' educational contexts.

6.6 A Case Example of Purpose Learning: Summit Public Schools

Since inception in 2003, Summit Public Schools has been interested in facilitating identity and purpose development with students, as senses of purpose and identity are recognized as foundational precursors of college readiness. In 2018–19, Summit piloted a new identity and purpose development curriculum with more than 100 students in the 10th and 12th grades in an opt-in electives class. As described in greater detail shortly, students who completed the curriculum reported substantial increases in their sense of purpose and identity over time.

About Summit Public Schools. Summit Public Schools (Summit) is a public charter school network with schools located in California and Washington. Summit serves approximately 4650 students annually at 15 middle and high schools. The student populations at Summit schools reflect the diversity of the communities in which they are located: 45% of Summit students receive free and reduced-price lunch, 14% have an Individualized Education Plan, and 14% are English Learners. Approximately 46% of students are Hispanic, 17% White, 14% Asian, 9% two or more races, 11% African American, and 12% who indicated another race not specified here.

Purpose and identity development at Summit Public Schools. To intentionally foster identity and purpose development in students, Summit has implemented several identity and purpose development strategies network-wide: (1) trusting relationships between students and adults, and (2) dedicated class time to explore identity and purpose.

Summit's strategies to build trusting relationships within the school environment are grounded in empirical work establishing that purpose development is enabled when students have a trusting relationship with an adult (e.g., Liang et al., 2016; Lund et al., 2019; Moran et al., 2012). To help facilitate close student-adult relationships, Summit schools are designed intentionally to be small so that every student is known. This approach is consistent with theory and research implicating the crucial role that feelings of belonging have on purpose development (e.g., Blattner et al., 2013; Hill et al., 2016; Crespo et al., 2013). Additionally, each student at Summit has a designated Mentor, an adult on campus who loops with the student throughout their

time at the school, and counsels the student on not only academic development but also identity and purpose development on a highly individualized basis.

Summit's commitment to fostering students' identity and purpose is also reflected through protected class-time to explore these constructs. On a weekly basis, students engage in dedicated development of social-emotional skills and identity via specific projects. In addition, students explore their own interests and passions via a robust electives program called Expeditions, which represents eight weeks of annual class-time.

Purpose and Identity Course Pilot at Summit Public Schools. Above and beyond these two network-wide strategies, in 2017–18 and 2018–19, Summit piloted elective courses designed to help students go even deeper on identity and purpose development. The focus of the courses was to provide a more holistic approach to purpose and identity development in school. These yearlong courses were opt-in for 10th and 12th graders, and students spent time reflecting on their identity and emerging sense of purpose, prototyping their purpose through a variety of strategies, and, finally, setting a long-term goal for their life based on their purpose and building a corresponding roadmap towards that goal. The process that students piloted was adapted from the process outlined in “Designing Your Life” (Burnett & Evans, 2016).

In brief, the curriculum of these year-long electives courses was divided into the following four projects. (1) The first project was a reflection of identity and exploration of what lives that consist of well-being and purpose could look like. The project culminated in students building a draft purpose statement for themselves. (2) The second project was an exploration of either careers (for 10th graders) or an exploration of and support in applying to concrete next step options for after high school (for 12th graders), such as four-year college, vocational school, gap years, etc. This project culminated in students setting a long-term career or college goal for themselves related to their purpose. (3) The third project was an opportunity to prototype their emerging purpose and life goals. Students were able to choose a variety of strategies to prototype such as doing a project consultancy in a career of interest, exploring a purpose-related research question of their own design such as what success means to them or what is important in managing money. This third project culminated in students refining their emerging sense of purpose and life goals. (4) The final project was for students to build a plan to reach their life goals and to solicit feedback on their plans from a group of advisors they trust. Students mapped out several possible five-year plans for themselves that would move them towards their purpose and life goals, and then defended those plans and asked for feedback, such as authenticity of their plans to their purpose, practicality of their plans, or reflections on unanticipated obstacles, from their Personal Advisory Board. At a minimum, their Personal Advisory Boards consisted of their parents/guardians, their Summit mentor teacher, and a peer. The project culminated in students making a decision about which life plan to embark upon.

Evaluation of Purpose and Identity Pilot Course. To evaluate the efficacy of Summit's pilot course, we utilized a pre- and post- survey as well as ongoing student feedback surveys. We focused on understanding if there had been a change in purpose as a result of engaging in the courses. For the context of the pilot, Summit defined

purpose as, “A process by which students seek, identify, pursue, and refine a central life aim that is both meaningful to the student and consequential to the world.” Survey questions were designed in collaboration with a team of both researchers and practitioners and built upon purpose survey questions found in the literature (e.g., Steger et al., 2006). For example, students were asked to rank the degree to which they agreed with such statements as: “I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful,” “I have discovered a satisfying life purpose,” and “My life has a clear sense of purpose.”

Overall, an increase in sense of purpose as a result of the courses was found, with students reporting that the experience, particularly the final project of the year, was helpful to them. For example, students enrolled in the courses reported an increase in having a good sense of what makes their lives meaningful from 66% at the beginning of the school year to 76% at the end of the school year. An increase in discovering a satisfying life purpose, from 50% at the beginning of the year to 66% at the end of the school year, was also reported. There was also evidence of an increase in students believing that their life has a clear sense of purpose, from 52% at the beginning of the year to 65% at the end of the year. While these patterns suggest that the Summit program increased average levels of purpose among students, it is also important to note that many students (half or more), did not start the year with a completely blank state of purpose. That is, consistent with the overall themes of this chapter, it appears that schools could play a role in not only igniting the development of youth purpose if it does not already exist, but also in helping to expand, refine, and concretize the seeds of purpose that have already been planted.

Students’ open-ended feedback corroborates these results and perhaps provides more in-depth information on the effectiveness of the program. For example, with respect to the developmentally salient conflict of identity versus role diffusion (Erikson, 1968), Summit’s course was set up in such a way for a student to explore their identity and purpose and then frame and present back their conclusions to their family and friends. The intention is to give students agency in their identity versus role diffusion conflict and students appeared to find the program’s experience, particularly of building their life plans and soliciting feedback on their life plans, to be useful. As one student noted, “It gave me a chance to clearly understand for myself and explain to those close to me what I plan for my life to look like.” Another interesting feedback point was how many students appreciated the opportunity to plan for their futures, something that is of key concern, especially in the 12th grade year and in terms of developmental needs for autonomy and future-orientation (Metzger et al., 2018). A student shared, “I liked that I had to thoroughly plan my future for the next 5 years. This forced me to plan for any issue that can possibly go wrong and it helped me make the best possible plan for myself. I also liked that I got feedback on my plan which improved it overall.”

The learnings from these innovative pilot courses suggests that there could be great promise for schools to implement effective purpose learning curricula to foster youth development. Notably, more detailed results and conclusions can be found in the following report: *Clearing the Path: How Schools Can Improve College Access and Persistence for Every Student*, which can be found on Summit’s website at <https://>

summitps.org/the-summit-model/the-science-of-summit/ or directly online at <https://summitps.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/CNS-whitepaper-092419.pdf>.

6.7 Implications and Challenges to School-Based Purpose Learning Programs

From a theoretical, empirical, and applied perspective, the importance of both identity and purpose, as well as their inextricable links, are abundantly clear (Hill & Burrow, 2012). Particularly for adolescents, for whom processes of identity and purpose formation are highly salient (Erikson, 1968), the school setting is thick with great opportunities to cultivate these crucial developmental assets (Malin, 2018). Researchers and practitioners alike have called for greater attention towards clarifying the diverse pathways that might lead to purpose development (e.g., Hill et al., 2013; Liang et al., 2017), and our work offers several specific suggestions and related implications as well.

However, as school-based purpose learning programs are spreading and currently in demand, there are challenges that need to be addressed as the field grows. One significant challenge can be posed as a question: What is the impact on students when they are asked to explore personal values, identity, meaning, and purpose at school? This question is particularly important given the number of students who experience marginalization both in society and at school, and the likely impact that marginalization can have on purpose development (Sumner, Burrow, & Hill, 2018). It raises follow-up questions about cultural differences in attitudes about sharing and discussing personal and family values at school, about possible conflicts between family and school values, about the vulnerability of some students who do not feel safe at school or who have aspects of their identity that may not be safely explored at school, and about the risk for students who have experienced trauma and may not be provided the psychological resources in the classroom to be safe discussing their personal lives. For example, students may feel threatened or vigilant if they perceive that aspects of their identity could result in negative treatment in a setting such as a classroom (Cohen & Garcia, 2008). These are issues that need to be a central consideration when proposing that schools implement a purpose learning program.

Although these are clear challenges to school-based purpose learning initiatives, there is theory and research evidence suggesting that classroom activities such as personal values exploration can have a positive impact on students. Self-affirmation theory, for example, proposes that people can recover from the psychological damage of identity threats by reflecting on and asserting the aspects of themselves that they value most (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). Experiments with self-affirmation interventions with students have had positive results. For example, ethnic minority middle school students who reflected on a value that was important to them at the start of the year experienced a greater sense of trust and fairness in school throughout the year compared to classmates who did not reflect on an important

value (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Masters, 2006). In another experiment, middle school students who were in racial groups most susceptible to identity threat at school (Black and Hispanic students) had a positive impact on their academic performance if they completed a self-affirmation activity, whereas White and Asian students did not experience the same effect (Hanselman, Bruch, Gamoran, & Borman, 2014). The results of these studies suggest that exploring and expressing important personal values at school may benefit students who are most vulnerable to identity threat, though considerably more research should be done to examine the possible differential impacts of school-based purpose learning experiences on heterogeneous students.

The importance of considering a more individualized and culturally-sensitive approach can be more broadly reflected in light of Erikson's (1968) original references to the adolescent period as being characterized by a "crisis." There are likely key individual differences in terms of how stressful or conflictual these explorative processes might be, but some research indeed suggests that the search for purpose (e.g., as measured through a survey that assesses both purpose and meaning) can be negatively associated with well-being (Kiang & Witkow, 2015; Steger et al., 2006). Burrow et al. (2010) applied an identity status framework (e.g., Marcia, 1966) to the construct of purpose itself and found that positive outcomes and emotional well-being tended to be linked to individuals who have established a clear sense of purpose, as compared to their counterparts who have not yet committed and might still be in "crisis" or engaging in purpose exploration. However, other work points to the search for purpose as having positive implications, and linked to both hope and life satisfaction, especially among samples of youth and adolescents (Bronk et al., 2009). Given these competing views, one important area for future research is to better understand the specific processes of purpose development, with the understanding that precise pathways might look different for adolescents from different backgrounds (Liang et al., 2017). More systematic attention towards understanding identity and purpose development with the use of longitudinal data and person-centered approaches, such as cluster analyses or profile approaches as described by Burrow et al. (2010), could be helpful in delineating heterogeneity in developmental pathways.

Purpose researchers and school-based purpose learning programs also face challenges in measuring and reporting their outcomes. As described earlier, purpose is defined in different ways in the literature, with some shared understanding of the core elements of the purpose construct but significant disagreement about whether, for example, purpose is necessarily beyond-the-self oriented or whether it is a "sense" that someone experiences or demonstrates in their actions in the world. Numerous measures of purpose have been used in the research, with no conclusion about which are best to measure growth in purpose resulting from an intervention. The working definition that we attempted to focus on in the current chapter is one that views purpose as both inward and outward facing, but it is important to note that the literature that we reviewed varied in specific operationalizations. It remains an empirical question whether certain measures of purpose, for example, those that rely on beyond-the-self perspectives versus those that focus more on goal orientation versus those that simply assess the presence of purpose more broadly speaking, are more or less strongly linked to either identity constructs and/or adjustment. Consequently,

although the use of the purpose learning framework is increasing across the U.S., there is still a lack of clarity on how to precisely target and assess purpose, and limited evidence to demonstrate whether and how these programs impact students' purpose development and positive identity formation. Early efforts to evaluate these programs are underway, including our described evaluation work at Summit Public Schools, but far more work needs to be done.

In light of broader implications, we should explicitly note that the adjustment indicators we have focused on in this chapter have been largely based on students' and teachers' subjective self-reports. Moreover, one of our goals with this chapter is to promote the argument that purpose is an important outcome of education in its own right. However, the current policy context emphasizes that the primary target of school is a narrower index of academic achievement and more objective measures of success. Although there is little and inconsistent support for any direct links between purpose development and academic achievement, and although it is not our intention to argue for academic-instrumental motivations for focusing on purpose development at school, there is some evidence suggesting that promoting purpose at school might benefit academic engagement and actual performance. For example, students who had a self-transcendent purpose for learning showed greater academic diligence and academic performance compared with those who did not (Yeager et al., 2014). Research also suggests that academic performance might be enhanced when students perceive that what they are learning has useful purpose in their lives, or when they have an internal purpose for what they are learning as opposed to an externally imposed purpose for learning (Hulleman, Godes, Hendricks, & Harackiewicz, 2010; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). While having a purpose for learning is not the same thing as having a purpose in life, these studies suggest that the internal drive that purpose in life provides might be a source of motivation for academic engagement and performance. Consistent with these perspectives, Kiang and Witkow (2015) found that adolescents' presence and search for purpose were both associated with academic motivation and the perception that academic success has real-world utility, which could arguably serve as mediators for subsequent indicators of achievement and success.

That said, there is also the possibility that the pursuit of purpose and academic performance (e.g., grades, test scores) might not align. For example, if purpose is not inherently related to the school context (e.g., wanting to become an NBA basketball player), then it is possible that any purpose-related activities might take time away from school and hinder academic success. However, if one's purpose is tied to academics (e.g., wanting to become a doctor to help people with cancer), then we might see positive links between purpose and doing well in school, knowing that this is needed to achieve one's goals. Emerging work similarly suggests that interventions that boost both purpose and internal feeling of control over academic success could improve actual grades (Pizzolato et al., 2011). Further empirical work could more systematically examine such possible individual differences and unpack specific longitudinal and mediating pathways to better pinpoint diverse adjustment implications including more objective, markers of success within the academic realm.

6.8 Summary and Conclusions

Purpose and identity development are foundational and complementary activities of adolescence. As adolescents spend a large portion of time at school, both students and school personnel can benefit from giving dedicated class-time to the exploration of purpose and identity and its impacts both inside and outside of the classroom. If designed carefully with cultural, social, and emotional considerations in mind, schools can offer the unique opportunity of allowing students to explore their purpose and identity development in ways that students may or may not receive outside of the classroom. Additionally, intentional and culturally sensitive reflection on purpose and identity can increase a student's sense of belonging in school, resulting in a host of positive impacts within a classroom environment as well as in terms of youth socioemotional well-being more generally. Key factors to consider when designing school-based purpose and identity programs include selecting the definition of purpose that most resonates for the school's context, selecting the framework for identity and purpose development, and implementing activities and experiences that acknowledge manifold paths to purpose that are ideally tailored to each adolescent's background and needs. Ultimately, by capitalizing on school contexts to help build adolescent identity and purpose, youth could be better poised to strengthen their sense of self, face and overcome challenges, and contribute in meaningful and highly personal ways to their family and social groups, community, and the broader world around them.

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