

INTRODUCTION

What matters most to you? What are the things you really care about? If you could change anything in the world, what would you change?

When you were in school, did you have the opportunity to explore these questions and really think about what you value, who you wanted to become, or how you wanted to use your learning to contribute to the world? Did your school assignments connect to the things you thought were most meaningful and help you develop your purpose in life? At the Stanford Center on Adolescence, my colleagues and I have asked hundreds of teenagers these questions, and the majority say, “I want to get good grades so I can go to college, get a good job, and be successful.” Students today know the script well, but do they know what it means? Do they have a vision of what success looks like for them? In our interviews, we have found that few students—about 24 percent of high school seniors and fewer in younger grades—have identified and are pursuing a purpose for their life. We do not expect that students have identified their singular life purpose before they leave high school, but we do know that high school students, and even middle school students, are capable of identifying something that matters, that gives them a sense of purpose, and pursuing it. The low levels of purpose seen among middle and high school students is a concern. Purpose is associated with numerous other benefits for young people, including academic benefits. Students who cannot connect their learning to any sense of purpose are less likely to be motivated by or engaged in what they are doing in school. In the bigger picture, they have no purpose to connect their education to as a

whole, so even if they learn the skills they will need in college, most students lack the sense of purpose that will get them through college successfully. Students are not actually ready for college if they have no idea how to make good use of the time and resources once they get there.

What if purpose were the purpose of education? Purpose, as it is discussed in this book, is a future-directed goal that is personally meaningful and aimed at contributing to something larger than the self. Purpose is a driving force that motivates and organizes shorter-term goal setting, goal action, and behavior. With a sense of purpose, young people are more inclined to seek out and gain the skills and expertise they need to fulfill their goals, so purpose can drive learning that results in the necessary college and work life skills to succeed. What if we put this highly motivating driver at the center of how, why, and what we teach students, and let that purpose be the primary driver of students' engagement with school? The challenges of doing so are immediately evident. Purpose is different for everyone, so how can a teacher teach to every students' purpose? How can students know their purpose at such a young age? How can purpose motivate students to learn the difficult and boring academic skills that they need but that do not align with their interests? The answer to the last question is it cannot, at least, not always and not for every student. However, there is a lot that purpose can do to engage and motivate students at school, and I believe it can transform schools as well. I wrote this book to interrogate these questions and challenges and explore the role that purpose can play in shaping school climate, relationships, and learning activities. My purpose in writing this book is to share what I have learned from over a decade of conducting research on youth purpose at the Stanford Center on Adolescence, and from investigating current efforts to teach for purpose in K-12 schools, so that educators can help more students make the connection between what they are learning now and the person they want to become in the future.

PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

You might be wondering if this book is about having a purpose for teaching, helping students understand the purpose of what they are learning,

or helping students create lives of purpose. The answer, of course, is “yes,” and you will find all three woven into these chapters. The goal of this book is to argue for expansive thinking about the direction our schools can take, as we increasingly need students to be educated differently from how they were in the past—students who are creative, critical thinkers, innovative problem finders and solvers, socially and environmentally aware, and self-directed in constructing their lives. Developing these capacities in students requires that they see the purpose of what they are learning for their future, and it requires that students learn to see themselves as people who can and must contribute to bettering the world. At the same time, the goal of this book is not to propose a whole new set of reforms for teachers to take on, or argue for the implementation of cutting-edge educational tools and technology to individualize student learning. Teachers, I believe, have the capacity to adopt and adapt strategies for purposeful teaching from enduring good ideas in educational theory and practice. There are a few new teaching ideas in these pages, but largely there is a call for educators to ask themselves the question posed above: What if purpose were the purpose of education? And with that question as the driving force, reimagine the whole experience of school for our children.

We teach children that they should aspire to academic achievement at all costs, in some cases asking them to sacrifice their childhood for academic gains. When we do look beyond academic skills, it is to focus on “non-cognitive” character strengths and skills that will support their academic achievement, such as grit and growth mindset. We put tremendous value on academic achievement, and we convey that value to students, but what about their lives beyond school, when academic achievement is behind them? What about all of the other domains of life that they live and develop in? The current mantra in schools is “college and career readiness,” and it is true that college and career are crucial beacons for guiding students to their future, especially for students who see college as a distant or unrealistic goal for their lives. But when do we ask students to articulate a vision of who they are becoming and the kind of person they want to be? We teach students grit, growth mindset and self-control, hoping that they can use these strengths and mindsets

to pursue their goals, but when do they get to think about *what* their goals are, what they want for their future, who they are becoming, and how they want to be in the world? What kind of world do they want to live in, and how will they participate in creating that world? What are their most central values and how are they going to live out those values? We have created such a narrow vision of success for our children and a shortsighted target for their dreams. By focusing on purpose, we can expand that vision of success. Students do not need to know what they want to do with their life when they leave high school, nor do they need to have a single purpose figured out, and that is not the goal of this book. They should, however, know that purpose is accessible to them and worth striving for, and they should have aspirations and expectations of their future that are robust enough to set their sights through and beyond college, even if those aspirations will evolve over time.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book integrates three sources of information to explore the question of making purpose the purpose of school: theory and research on youth purpose development, examination of pedagogy and teaching practices that can support purpose development, and investigation of programs designed to teach students to create purpose in their lives. Part 1 provides an overview of purpose theory and research from the perspective of how it relates to the context of schools and education. If we want to do anything with purpose, we first need to have a sense of what purpose is and what gives us a sense of purpose. Therefore, chapter 1 opens the book with a purpose exploration activity to examine what drives you and why. With an internalized sense of your own purpose in mind, the first chapter then unpacks some popular ideas about purpose, looking at some of the myths and metaphors that tend to shape our beliefs about purpose.

Chapter 2 takes us to the earliest days of purpose formation, investigating play and making activities as the foundation of purpose. This chapter discusses concepts related to purpose—meaning and intention—as aspects of purpose that can be supported through playing and

making things at school. Play is presented as an early childhood activity, but the connection between play and purpose should not end in elementary school. The processes involved in playing with ideas and making connections between our inner lives and the outside world are essential to purpose throughout the life span. Chapter 3 relates purpose to social-emotional development and learning, emphasizing that purpose is personally meaningful and also outward looking, and therefore integrates social and psychological development. In this discussion of the social, emotional, and moral aspects of purpose, we also find the advantages teachers might see when their students have a sense of purpose, such as increased motivation and engagement at school. Chapter 4 outlines the theory of purpose as the integration of three dimensions—beyond-the-self motivation, higher-order goal setting, and action—and proposes a set of skills—self-regulation, agency, and values formation—that form an internal engine that can help integrate the three dimensions. This chapter then begins the transition to part 2 by introducing some of the research on social factors that support young people’s purpose development.

Part 2 takes us into schools to investigate the pedagogies and practices that can support student purpose. The questions examined in the second half of the book are: How can schools and teachers support student purpose? And, what is the impact on schools when they do? Therefore, this section starts in chapter 5 with an investigation of school climate and student-teacher relationships, how they can be shaped to support purpose, and inversely, how relationships and climate in schools are transformed when purpose is prioritized. Chapter 7 provides a framework for making instruction more purposeful through project-based learning and related pedagogies. This chapter highlights the elements of project-based learning that are believed to support purpose according to theory and research on purpose development. Examples provided in this chapter show how project methods can be made purposeful at different school stages. Chapter 9 introduces content that can be integrated into the curriculum to support purpose development. This chapter looks at four topics—empathy, values, the future, and power—in terms of how they relate to purpose and strategies for including them in the curriculum so that they can support purpose. This chapter also

introduces the potential of teaching purpose as a topic with some interventions that were designed to engage students in exploration of their own purpose through short activities.

Woven throughout part 2 are profiles of external organizations that have developed purpose programs for schools. There are six profiles all together, two each in chapters 6, 8, and 10, describing organizations that bring purpose education to K–12 schools throughout the US. The profiles describe the models they use, some of their strategies, and the response from teachers, principals, and students. Each profile demonstrates the innovative approaches these organizations are developing to not just teach purpose, but to transform how we educate young people. Though each organization takes a unique approach, their commonalities point to elements that can make up the core of a purpose education program. Chapter 11 summarizes what was learned from the program profiles and looks back over the entire book to offer a point-by-point list of what educators can do right now to start making their classrooms and schools more purposeful.

Throughout the book, we hear the voices of young people who participated in research interviews conducted by the Stanford Center on Adolescence. Their names are pseudonyms, but their stories and quotes are real and provided here to illustrate the role that adults and schools can play in helping students create purpose in their lives. The young people quoted and described throughout this book are exemplary in their purpose and are not meant to indicate what is normal for adolescents. Rather, they show what is possible when the circumstances and opportunities are right for purpose to flourish.

The goal of this book is not to prescribe a program for teaching purpose. Rather, my goal is to offer purpose as a touchstone for evolving the practice of education, and to suggest strategies and frameworks that might inspire educators to take steps toward creating a culture of purpose in their schools. The ideas in this book are based on longstanding theory and research in youth purpose development, along with conversations with teachers and school leaders, program providers, and students, as well as observations in schools. There are brief interventions for teaching purpose and related concepts included here, which

are effective according to the research. However, my hope is to leave readers with encouragement to do more. Rather than asking how little of the school day can be spent on student purpose development, this book ambitiously looks at purpose as a comprehensive approach to addressing some of the biggest challenges schools face today. We have, together and over time, created a school system that does not work for our children or our society today. But we also have the power to change it. Teachers, counselors, administrators, and all the adults in schools who work directly with students are the ones who can make this happen. The aim of this book is to encourage and inspire you to bring purpose to your work with students, to make our schools places of purpose.