

APPROACHES TO FOSTERING PURPOSE AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

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Viktor Frankl's (1959) recognition of the centrality of purpose and meaning to psychological well-being has had a tremendous influence on the way we think about optimal human functioning. His book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, triggered significant interest in purpose, and the introduction of positive psychology further



prompted empirical attention to the construct. As a result, a growing body of research has generated important new insights into purpose. In this brief essay, we outline some of the findings that have emerged, and based on these, we explain why it may make sense to cultivate purpose among adolescents in academic contexts. To that end, we offer three empirically-based approaches to doing so.

One important insight to surface since Frankl introduced purpose as a psychological construct is a clearer conception of what purpose is and how it differs from meaning. Recent research suggests they refer to related but distinct concepts. In short, this research suggests purpose refers to a subset of sources of personal meaning (Bronk, 2013). Meaning encompasses any personally significant experience, while a purpose in life refers specifically to a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once personally meaningful and at the same time leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the world beyond the self (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). In other words, a purpose is a goal of sorts. It represents a far-reaching aim that orients more toward short-term objectives. At the same time, a purpose in life is highly meaningful. It is so significant, in fact, that individuals do not merely dream about it but instead actively engage in pursuing it. They direct time, energy, and resources to making progress toward it. Finally, not only is a purpose in life personally meaningful, but it is also of consequence to the world beyond the self. It is motivated by a desire to make a difference in the broader world. Individuals find purpose in making their communities safer places, raising caring and concerned children, and in sharing their faith with others. In short, a purpose in life refers to those sources of personal meaning that are goal-oriented, enduring, and motivated by a desire to influence the world beyond the self (Bronk & Mangan, under review).

In addition to offering a clearer understanding of what constitutes a purpose in life, recent research sheds light on the benefits of purpose. Frankl recognized that

finding purpose was critical to surviving challenging situations. In its absence, people experience boredom, loneliness, and anxiety (Bigler, Neimeyer, & Brown, 2001; Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982). However, more recent research suggests that having a purpose not only shields individuals from negative states but can also foster positive ones. For instance, the presence of purpose is associated with physical and psychological well-being, and compared to others, individuals who lead lives of purpose report higher levels of happiness, hope, and life satisfaction (Boyle, Barnes, Buchman, & Bennett, 2009; Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009; French & Joseph, 1999; Kass, Friedman, Leserman, Caudill, Zuttermeister, & Benson, 1991; Melnechuk, 1988; Ryff & Singer, 1988). Based on these findings, fostering purpose is a relevant aim for all individuals, not only those who struggle psychologically (Bronk, 2013).

Another important finding suggests the development of purpose often coincides with adolescence. While individuals can discover meaningful aspirations at any time in the lifespan, they are particularly likely to do so during adolescence, when young people consider issues of identity (Erikson, 1968, 1980). As adolescents reflect on who they hope to become, they are also likely to consider what they hope to accomplish (Bronk, 2011).

Not only does the development of personally meaningful aspirations often correspond with adolescence, but leading a life of purpose also appears to provide particular advantages for individuals during this stage of life. For instance, among adolescents, the experience of purpose is associated with indicators of academic success, including grit, resilience, an internal locus of control, and academic efficacy (Benard, 1991; Hill, Burrow, & Bronk, 2014; Pizzolato, Brown, & Kanny, 2011; Solberg, O'Brien, Villareal, Kennel, & Davis, 1993). With these characteristics, it is no surprise that compared to others, adolescents with a purpose in life perform better academically and report their schoolwork is more meaningful (Benson, 2006; Pizzolato, Brown, & Kanny, 2011; Yeagar & Bundick, 2009). In addition to the academic benefits associated with pursuing a personally meaningful aim, a purpose in life can also provide young people with an important and inspiring sense of ultimate direction. Late adolescence is often recognized as a time full of opportunities and options (Arnett, 2014). Young people are presented with seemingly endless decisions regarding their academic, personal, and professional lives. While this can be exciting, it can also be overwhelming. Unsure of which path to pursue, some young people drift through their twenties, but discovering a purpose in life can provide them with a meaningful and productive direction (Damon, 2008). Knowing where they want to end up helps adolescents address more short-term issues regarding their education, relationships, and work.

Given that all people stand to benefit from leading lives of inspiring purpose and that the development of enduring, meaningful aims often coincides with adolescence, it makes sense to try to foster a purpose in life among all youth. Such an effort represents an important manifestation of Frankl's logotherapeutic work. Further, since purpose is associated with indicators of academic success, secondary schools offer a useful starting place for widespread interventions. To that end, members of our Adolescent Moral Development lab at the Claremont Graduate University have

created three empirically-based approaches to fostering purpose among adolescents in educational settings.

Educational Interventions

Few studies have directly investigated how to cultivate purpose among young people (Koshy & Mariano, 2011), but the studies that have been conducted suggest that it can be encouraged through different avenues, including goal setting, values clarification, and gratitude.

Goal Setting

Because a purpose in life represents a particular kind of far horizon aim, one way to approach its cultivation in secondary schools is through goal setting activities. While longer-term interventions will likely produce more enduring effects, even relatively brief ones appear to cultivate purpose. For instance, a recent study determined that adolescents who participated in a 45-minute interview about meaningful life aims reported significantly higher rates of purpose months later (Bundick, 2011). The opportunity to reflect on personally significant long-term goals seems to be an effective means of encouraging the growth of purpose. Studies also find that reflecting on the future is associated with greater experiences of meaning in the present (Baumeister & Vohs, 2013; Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013). To translate these findings into a school based activity, students can be asked to respond to the following writing prompt: If things go according to plan, what will you be doing in 20 years? Who will be in your life? What will be important to you? Why? This prompt represents a modified version of the Best Possible Selves intervention (King, 2001), which has been found to increase positive affect, life satisfaction, optimism, relatedness, and motivation, all associated with the development of purpose (King, 2001; Layous, Nelson, & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011; Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002; Peters, Flink, Boersma, & Linton, 2010). In addition to considering what their ultimate aims entail, students are also asked to write about how they will reach these goals. What activities do they need to engage in, and what accomplishments do they need to achieve, both in the immediate- and intermediate-term, to make this image a reality? Initial findings reveal that completing these writing prompts over a two-week period results in significantly higher rates of purpose (Bronk, Riches, & Dubon, in preparation).

Values Clarification

Another empirically-based approach to fostering purpose involves values clarification and strengths identification. Young people discover purpose when they apply their strengths to address personally meaningful issues in the broader world (Damon, 2008). Studies find that helping young people think deeply and intentionally about their skills and values cultivates the growth of purpose (Dik, Steger, Gibson, & Peisner, 2011; Pizzolato, Brown, & Kanny, 2011).

A variety of activities can be employed to help young people reflect on their deeply held beliefs. Students can be asked to complete a Q-sort, in which they

organize their values, or they can be asked to write about the things that matter most to them. Self-assessments and inventories, such as the VIA Inventory of Strengths (formerly known as the Values in Action Inventory) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), can be administered to assist youth in identifying their talents. Once young people have a clear sense of what their strengths and values are, they need opportunities to explore how they can apply them to begin to address meaningful issues in the broader world. Connecting young people to mentors, both within the school and broader community, can be helpful in this regard, as mentors can serve as important resources, linking young people to opportunities to enact their budding purposes in life (Park, 2011).

Gratitude

A third avenue for fostering youth purpose involves gratitude. Grateful thinking helps individuals savor positive experiences and appreciate life circumstances (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Additionally, gratitude can encourage moral behavior and help build social bonds (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001), both of which are important for fostering a commitment to beyond-the-self aims. Practicing gratitude also encourages self-transcendent thinking and action, which has been shown to cultivate purpose (Bronk, 2012; Damon, 2008; Park, 2011). Focusing on the things that young people are grateful for leads not only to an appreciation for the good things in their own life, but also to a desire to share these blessings with others (Damon, 2008).

In addition to encouraging adolescents to talk about the experiences, opportunities, and individuals for which they are thankful, empirical studies find that activities can also effectively encourage the practice of gratitude. Adolescents can be asked to record blessings weekly in a gratitude journal (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008), to write a letter to someone for whom they are grateful, recounting the ways in which this person has blessed them (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009), and to think more intentionally about benefit appraisals, which entails reflection on both the benefits recipients receive and the costs benefactors incur in the practice of gratitude (Froh & Bono, 2011). Each of these activities has been found to cultivate gratitude, which in turn can inspire upstream reciprocity in the form of a commitment to purpose (Bronk, Mangan, & Baumsteiger, under review).

Conclusion

Frankl discovered a meaningful purpose in sharing with the world the importance of being committed to a beyond-the-self aim. Were it not for this insightful recognition, our understanding of purpose would not be nearly as advanced as it is today. We owe a debt of gratitude to Frankl for his commitment to his own purpose in life. His ideas inspired studies – summarized above – that have revealed a clearer understanding of what purpose is, of when in the lifespan it is likely to take root, and of how it can be cultivated among young people more widely. Findings from this growing body of research generally validate the basic premises of logotherapy.

They also suggest that academic contexts may be effective settings for the cultivation of purpose among adolescents. While research that will help us better understand how to foster purpose in these settings is just getting under-way, the present article offers a starting point for this exploration. As Frankl notes in his writing on the topic, a purpose represents an individual's ultimate source of motivation, and the role of the logotherapist – and perhaps the teacher, too – is to help people discover it.

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