



## A Qualitative Impact Study of the QUESTion Project by Heather Malin, Senior Researcher, Stanford Center for Adolescence

### **SUMMARY**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Adolescent mental health is on the decline and the painful evidence is impossible to ignore. Schools, where adolescents spend over six hours per day and where most of their learning and social interactions occur, have traditionally avoided taking an active role in supporting students' mental health, and more recently have narrowly prioritized college admissions. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is gaining traction in elementary schools, but less so in high schools, where adolescent students are expected to focus on academic content and teachers are stretched thin trying to meet graduation requirements. Important aspects of students' identity are left outside the school building—what they find meaningful, their values, their hopes, their fears, and what gives them a sense of purpose.

SEL offerings can be tuned to adolescents' mental wellness needs by focusing on identity, meaning, and purpose. For example, school-based programs aimed at identity and purpose development can provide students a space in school where they feel safe to express themselves and explore possibilities for their lives. Purpose, in particular, is known to be associated with numerous other indicators of wellbeing, including lower stress, more positive affect, fewer risk-taking behaviors, better ability to cope with adversity, and more hope for the future (Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2011; Burrow, O'Dell, & Hill, 2010; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010; Russo-Netzer & Shoshani, 2020). At school, students with purpose feel greater personal responsibility for their school performance, find their schoolwork more engaging and meaningful, and are more effective at exploring vocational possibilities (Anthis, 2014; Pizzolato, Brown, & Kanny, 2011; Yeager & Bundick, 2009). Perhaps most essential to adolescent wellbeing, beyond the empirical correlations, is the value of purpose as an ultimate indicator of both personal fulfillment and meaningful connection with others.

How did we end up with a school system that purportedly prepares students for their future yet fails to support them in developing a sense of purpose for their lives? Education leaders struggle to find time in the school day for non-academic content, yet there are examples of schools that have found ways to bring purpose-focused programs to their students and teachers. One such program is the QUESTion Project, offered by the New York based Open Future Institute. In the QUESTion Class, a central component of the QUESTion Project, teachers engage students in meaningful discussions about life and challenge them to explore powerful themes with their classmates, such as fearlessness, interconnectedness, choice, the bigger picture, and purpose. This report presents findings from interviews conducted with recent alumni of the QUESTion Class, teachers who teach the class, and principals of schools that offer the QUESTion Class.

## THE NEED FOR PURPOSE DEVELOPMENT IN HIGH SCHOOLS

A teacher interviewed for this study discussed her concern about focusing on college admissions while neglecting students' purpose before she started teaching the QUESTion Class:

*I felt like there was something missing from education.... There was always this part of mentoring young people that wasn't being done in schools.... I want my students ... to feel like they can be successful in college.... But I often found students ...would come back and they'd be like, they tried college and it wasn't for them. They didn't fit in, and they just quit. It's so heartbreaking.... And when having chit-chat conversations with them on the street, like what are you doing? What's important in your life, what's going on? And they're just kind of, I don't know, living check to check and surviving rather than thriving.*

Getting students over the college admission hurdle is not enough. Among those who do attend college, an alarming 40% drop out each year (Hanson, 2021). Some reasons cited by students who left college related to lacking purpose, direction, and connection with others. They felt unprepared for college, lost motivation because they were pressured by family to attend college, and lacked meaningful connections on campus. Students who did not go to college likewise struggled with lack of purpose in pursuing alternate paths. For example, in 2017 only 58% of high school graduates who did not go to college were in the labor force, and only 16% of students who chose a professional certificate program graduated on schedule.

The mental health crisis among adolescents and young adults is another indicator that students are not getting the support they need to find purpose and thrive in and beyond high school (Bitsko et al., 2018; Curtin, 2020). Schools can help mitigate this crisis by providing students with support for social and emotional development. Unfortunately, many social-emotional learning (SEL) programs offered to high school students are ineffective because they are simply scaled-up elementary school programs that do not consider the distinct developmental needs of adolescents (Yeager, 2017). Thus, there is a pressing need for more age-relevant social-emotional programs to be made available for high school students.

## **SUMMARY OF IMPACT ON STUDENTS, EDUCATORS AND SCHOOLS**

### **Impact that Teachers and School Leaders saw on students**

1. Students increase self-understanding and gain maturity in asking questions about their life path.
2. Students listen to each other and have deep and meaningful conversations with their peers.
3. Students see that we are all connected, that they do not live in isolation, and recognize that their decisions affect others.
4. Students connect what they are doing now with where they want to go in the future.
5. Students learn to align their life choices to what they care about most.
6. Students gain an empowered sense of self.
7. Students appear to feel peace when they walk into the class and feel recharged when they walk out.
8. Students gain insights and skills that improve their school experience and performance.

### **Impact that Students reported during the study**

1. Gained Ability to Recognize and Connect with the Humanity of Others.
2. Learned to Look Beyond Assumptions About Others.
3. The QUESTion Class is a place to practice deep self-reflection through discussion of meaningful life questions
4. Becoming Open to Possibilities for My Life
5. Developed Courage for Self-Expression and Self-Exploration at School.
6. Expanded Capacity to Develop Purpose Through Ongoing Self-Discovery.
7. Discovered Ability to Pursue Beyond-the-Self Purpose.
8. Gained Autonomy Over Life Choices.
9. Openness to Others and a Shared Humanity
10. Gained Greater Capacity to Connect with Others and Build Trusting Relationships.
11. Developed Enduring Capacity to Have Deeper Relationships with Others.

**TABLE 1**

Alumni Interview Categories and Codes with Percent of Sample that Received Each Code.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Courage, Vulnerability, and Trust (94%)	1.1 Courage in the Face of Fear (61%)	Class taught them to accept fears, leave comfort zone, or understand fearlessness as courage in the face of fear.
	1.2 Overcome Shyness to Be True Self (56%)	Class provided opportunities to overcome fear or shyness, use voice, express true self with others.
	1.3 Vulnerability and Trust (33%)	Class provided opportunities to be vulnerable and see others being vulnerable. Building trust through shared vulnerability.
Openness and Perspective (94%)	2.1 Openness and Greater Perspective on Experiences and Possibilities (33%)	Class provided opportunities or greater capacity to be open-minded when reflecting on life experiences and future possibilities.
	2.2 Open to the Perspectives of Others (78%)	Class provided opportunities or greater capacity for being open to or accepting of perspectives of others, recognizing humanity of others, and seeing connection with others despite our differences.
	2.3 Self-reflection for Greater Self-awareness (56%, indirectly endorsed by all interviewees)	Class provided opportunities and skills for reflecting on self, thinking about the future, self in relation with others, with reference to greater depth, meaning, openness
Autonomy and Agency (100%)	3.1 Purpose Development is a Process (67%)	Class as a space to openly explore and share ideas about purpose.
	3.2 Autonomy of Choice (89%)	Class provided opportunities to think deeply about the future choices they were making, take responsibility for their choices, or explore the unlimited choices available to them.
	3.3 Individual and Social Agency/Power (39%)	Class supported personal or social power, agency, capacity to be a voice for or empowering others.
Beyond-the-Self Orientation (83%)	4.1 Class Inspired BTS Contribution (39%)	Class as a source of inspiration, learning, or discovery of self in terms of being someone who contributes in some way to the world beyond self.
	4.2 Social Awareness, Greater Awareness, and Related Action (39%)	Class raised awareness about equity or social justice
	4.3 Being a Small Part of a Large Movement (33%)	Class raised awareness about being small part of a larger social movement, capacity to contribute as a small part of something larger

### **Impact on Teachers reported during the study**

1. Teachers own personal development was enhanced by teaching the class.
2. Teachers improved their teaching by learning about themselves through class discussions.
3. Teachers got to see students' strengths that were not often revealed in traditional classes. The class gave students opportunities to demonstrate—and teachers to observe—leadership abilities, public speaking skills, goal-oriented thinking, thinking about the world beyond school, wisdom, depth of ideas and questions, and kindness.
4. Teachers felt more connected with students who were in their QUESTion Class and it affected their other classes.

### **Impact on schools reported by Principals**

1. Principals saw the QUESTion Class contributing to a more positive school culture.
2. The class brought out students' energy and engagement at school.
3. Infusing the school with a shared language around identity, choice, and purpose improved relationships between students and teachers.
4. Shared vulnerability in QUESTion Class discussions improved student-teacher relationships, which spilled over into other classes.
5. The class influenced a more holistic educational approach in the school that was not overly focused on state tests, SATs, and college admissions.
6. Principals appreciated that the QUESTion Class is different from other SEL programs.
7. Principals appreciated the challenging and meaningful life questions the QUESTion Class asks students to discuss and said other SEL programs are too simplistic and not engaging for high school students.

## **INDIVIDUAL, SCHOOL, AND SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this study demonstrate important impacts of the class for individual students. This study also suggests that the QUESTion Class might have benefits for schools as well as potential broader benefits for society. Here we discuss three examples of student-level impacts that also have potential school-level and societal impact.

**Student Voice.** As they overcame their shyness and gained confidence to express themselves in the QUESTion Class, alumni demonstrated increased capacity to use their voice in high school and beyond. Decades of research has shown that student voice is especially important for traditionally marginalized young people. For these students, having a stronger voice in school develops agency in pursuing their education and empowers them to recognize and respond to social injustice (Cook-Sather, 2020). The QUESTion Class enabled alumni to voice meaningful and vulnerable aspects of their identity in high school and college, and some said they learned not only to use their own voice, but also to speak up for others who might feel marginalized or silenced. There were additional benefits for alumni who had opportunities to facilitate or lead the class. Alumni who had these opportunities practiced leadership skills in the context of developing their voice and empowering other students to use their voices.

**Overcoming Assumptions About Others.** Through QUESTion Class discussions, alumni broke down boundaries and overcame assumptions they had previously held about their peers and teachers. Most alumni said this way of engaging with others was not a typical high school experience and it helped them see they had been making assumptions based on very superficial understanding of others. Alumni gained respect for the humanity of others as they listened to their classmates' different perspectives and learned to look beyond their assumptions. Scholars who investigate how young people develop capacity for democratic dialogue (and consequently, effective *participation in democratic society and capacity to uphold a democratic society*) emphasize that students need opportunities to discuss open questions "for which there are multiple and competing views," (McAvoy & Hess, 2013, p. 20). As demonstrated by the alumni in this study, such discussions, even without political content, helped them develop a more open attitude toward the differing perspectives of others and ability to not only tolerate, but build meaningful connections with people who had different perspectives.

**Purpose as an Individual and a Social Good.** QUESTion Class alumni learned to see purpose as a lifelong process of exploration and discovery, and many learned to think of purpose as a way to contribute to the world beyond themselves. Individuals benefit from gaining this perspective on purpose because it endows them with personal agency in creating a life of purpose. By developing their capacity for purpose, QUESTion alumni also increased their potential benefit to society. This effect has been measured in a couple of studies; for example, one study found that purpose mitigated the effect of growing up in poverty on adolescents' antisocial behaviors, and another found that purposeful adolescents often responded to adversity by using their personal strengths to have a positive impact on others (Machell, Disabato, & Kashdan, 2016; Malin, Morton, Nadal, & Smith, 2019). Aside from the empirical evidence that individual purpose benefits society, the theoretical implications are clear. Society benefits when individuals pursue a life of beyond-the-self purpose. Communities benefit from the prosocial activities of their members, and from being made up of individuals who are living lives of purpose.

**Potential Multifaceted Support for Student Wellbeing.** How can schools respond to increasing anxiety and depression among adolescent students? Better mental health is associated with students feeling they can talk to a teacher if they have worries, students feeling their school is inclusive of differences, having a sense of purpose, and students' sense of belonging at school (Kleinman & Beaver, 2013; Long, Zucca, & Sweeting, 2021; Singla, Shinde, Patton, & Patel, 2021). Therefore, when so many students are struggling with mental health challenges, educators should consider the benefits of a program like the QUESTion Class for students' wellbeing.