



Creating Awareness among Students aged 13-15 years towards the Development of a Purpose in Life

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of schools in helping 13-to-15-year-old students explore and define their purpose in life. The main objective was to support students in envisioning a happy and worthwhile future. Ninth standard students ($N=180$) of a school in Mumbai participated in this study. The value education periods in the school schedule were used to introduce concepts and themes that would provide foundations for decisions about their personal mission and vision. The students' statements of purpose in life have been examined. Also examined are student perspectives of what hinders them in identifying and pursuing a life purpose. Guidelines are proposed for creating a programme that would help school students to identify and pursue a meaningful and worthwhile purpose in life.

Keywords: adolescents, sense of purpose, meaning in life, school counselling, career counselling, value education

Introduction

"A sense of purpose and future signifies goal direction, educational aspirations, achievement motivation, persistence, hopefulness, optimism, and spiritual connectedness" (Bernard, 1991, p. 67). With the help of clinical observations, Erikson demonstrated that when young people do not dedicate themselves to a purpose while growing up, it becomes progressively more difficult for them to acquire inspiring belief systems later on in life (Erikson, 1968; Marcia as cited in Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003).

An adolescent spends a great deal of time in school. The system of schooling has tremendous impact on the lives of adolescents. As stated by one adolescent student, "My school is my second home and my teachers are parents who I have adopted". Damon (2008) in his book "The Path to Purpose: Helping our Children find their Calling in Life" stated that "(s)tudents need schools that are more than test-prep training grounds. They need schools that stir their imaginations and give them a chance to discover their deepest and most enduring interests. During their crucial formative years, they need schools that help them decide what kind of person they wish to become. Ultimately, they need schools that provide knowledge, mentoring, and encouragement that will help them identify their own moral north star, a compelling purpose to guide them through their journey in life" (p.7). Clearly,

schools play a pivotal role in shaping the lives of students and aiding in the development of a meaningful, worthwhile life purpose.

In this paper, the proactive model of counselling and guidance is adopted. Acknowledging the fact that prevention is better than cure, the emphasis of school counselling has shifted from a provision of services to only students in crisis to provision of services to the entire student population. School counsellors are now expected to reach out to all students in the areas of academic achievement, personal/social development, and career development, ensuring that today's students become the productive, well-adjusted adults of tomorrow (The American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2004). In this regard, it is extremely beneficial if the school counsellor facilitates the students to develop a life purpose.

The career counselling literature also has witnessed a major shift in paradigms. Recognising the importance of the meaning theme, many contemporary theorists view career development as an existential venture. A number of career development leaders have embraced a holistic approach. Savickas (1997) has laid emphasis on the reflective and interpersonal processes through which individuals derive meaning and direction in their vocational activities (<http://www.vocopher.com/pdfs/careerConstruction.pdf>).

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Miller-Tiedeman (1999) has viewed the process of career guidance as an internal journey requiring the use of a life-career compass (personal experience, intelligence and intuition) to find one's way through life. Hansen (2001) has emphasised integrative life planning, where family and work, spirituality and life-purpose, and diversity and inclusivity are closely knit. Guindon and Hanna (2002) write about the importance of synchronicity in understanding career development, and also suggest ways of capitalizing on it in career counselling (<http://vocationalpsychology.com>). These newer perspectives suggest that a variety of life-occurring events work in tandem in adding meaning to life.

The benefits of having a purpose in life (PIL) have been demonstrated in non-Indian research. Crumbaugh and Maholick's (1967) classic study demonstrated that PIL could be used to distinguish between psychiatric patients and non-patient populations. This study heralded the beginning of a trend in which researchers examined the relationship between PIL and a number of maladaptive behaviours and outcomes (Damon et al., 2003). Damon (1995) studied the effects of purposelessness and classified them as personal effects which included self-absorption, depression, addictions, in addition to a variety of psychosomatic ailments, and social effects which included deviant and destructive behaviours, a lack of productivity, and an inability to maintain stable interpersonal relationships. Instilling a sense of purpose is a beginning step in helping people value their own lives and what they do with their life (<http://www.pasadenaisd.org/parentuniversity/parent73.htm>). Boyle (2010) followed 900 community-dwelling older men and women, without dementia, enrolled in the Rush Memory and Aging Project. He and his associates found that those men and women who maintained a greater sense of purpose in life as they aged had more than a 50% reduced risk of developing Alzheimer's disease. Specifically, they found that study subjects who scored highest on the purpose in life measurement scale were 2.4 times more likely to remain free of Alzheimer's disease (compared to those who scored lowest). Additionally, they also found that those who developed mild cognitive impairment reported lower purpose in life scores and had a higher number of depressive symptoms

([http://www.worldhealth.net/news/sense-](http://www.worldhealth.net/news/sense-purpose-slashes-alzheimers-risk/)

[purpose-slashes-alzheimers-risk/](http://www.worldhealth.net/news/sense-purpose-slashes-alzheimers-risk/)). Therefore, having a sense of purpose is connected to psychological, socioemotional, physical health, and productive behaviours (Damon et al., 2003). Seligman (2009) reviewed 19 studies from the past 20 years that used the Penn Resiliency Program (PRP), which included more than 2,000 8-to-15-year-old school students. Students who took the PRP and the Positive Psychology Program (PPP) in which they were helped to develop a sense of purpose reported more enjoyment and engagement in school. The teachers reported that these students were more curious about what they were doing, loved learning and showed more creativity in school. The programmes also aided in prevention of depression and improvement of grades (www.physorg.com/news168874535.html).

In this study, the aim was to facilitate adolescent girls and boys in developing their purpose in life. This paper also addresses the following two questions: (a) How can adolescents be introduced to the concept of purpose? (b) What can schools/educational institutions do to promote the awareness about developing a purpose in life?

Method

Participants. All students of ninth standard ($N = 180$; 139 boys and 41 girls) of an Indian Council for Secondary Education (ICSE) school in South Mumbai participated in this study. Students' ages ranged from 13 to 15 years. For the most part, the students were from affluent families. Multiple religious communities were represented across the students (mainly, Hindu, Muslim and Christian).

Procedure. The value education periods of 30 minutes duration held once a week for 4 months were used to conduct interactive sessions with students in order to help them identify their purpose in life.

Measurement and plan of analysis. Examples of variables include personal and environmental hindrances in identifying and pursuing a purpose in life, and areas addressed by students in their statements of purpose in life. Student responses have been analysed quantitatively as well as qualitatively. For qualitative data analysis, techniques of theme extraction and thick description were used. For quantitative analysis, frequencies and percentages were computed.

Box 1. Examples of Activities that Were Used to Help Students Develop a Positive Purpose in Life.

- Students wrote down three good things that happened each day for a week. After which the students answered the following questions: What does this mean to you? How can you increase the possibility of having more of this good thing in the future?
- Students reflected and shared about: What's special about me? What is my role in life?
- Students were encouraged to make a commercial portraying the strengths that they possess.
- Students answered the questions such as: If you were given a chance to be born again which eminent personality would you like to be born as and why? What qualities of that person would you like to imbibe and inculcate in yourself.
- Students examined the lives of inspirational people. They made PowerPoint presentations on selected eminent persons.
- Students were encouraged to write out personal mission and vision statements in the form of a quotation, a story or a personal anthem (e.g., any song that inspired or motivated the student to work towards his/her purpose in life such as "We are the World", "Heal the World").

Results**Activities that were used to help students develop a positive purpose in life.**

Various activities/exercises were conducted with students to help them develop a positive purpose in life (refer to Box 1). For example, students were encouraged to write down three good things that happened each day for a week. After which the students answered the following questions: "What does this mean to you?" and "How can you increase the possibility of having more of this good thing in the future?" It is interesting to comment on the adolescents' selection of eminent persons whom they found inspirational. Across the boys, four eminent men and two eminent women were represented. The men included American music super heroes such as the deceased Michael Jackson (1958-2009), and retired American sports heroes such as Michael Jordan. The men also included Leonard Da Vinci (1452-1519), Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), and a current activist fighting corruption in India, Anna Hazare. The women included the Noble Peace Prize laureate (1979) Mother Teresa (1910 -1997) renowned for her exceptional service to the poor and Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), an Indian independence activist, politician and poet. Across the girls, five eminent women were represented. These included women from other countries such as Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), Princess Diana (1961-1997), and J. K. Rowling. The two Indian women were Kiran Bedi, renowned for her service in the Indian police force and for the welfare of prison inmates, and Medha Patkar, an environmental issues activist.

Student perspectives on what hinders them in identifying and pursuing

their purpose in life. Students were asked: What are some things you have wanted to do and have not been able to accomplish for a long time? They were also asked to make a list of desired behaviours and reasons for not being able to accomplish the desired outcomes. Student responses on what hindered them in identifying and pursuing their purpose in life were classified into personal and environmental hindrances. The most frequently expressed personal hindrance shared by girls was lack of self-confidence; whereas, boys most frequently stated that they did not know how to manage time (refer to Table 1). Procrastination was the second most frequently mentioned personal hindrance, common for both boys and girls. With regard to external (or environmental) hindrances, girls most frequently mentioned lack of guidance from parents and other significant people in their lives. In contrast, boys most frequently mentioned peer pressure as an external hindrance.

Students' statements of their purpose in life. Sixty-five percent of the students needed to develop their purpose in life. Half of the number of girls had already defined a purpose as opposed to the boys (refer to Table 2). As one adolescent girl stated, "When we have a purpose, we have an aim in life and we get to know what we want and where we are going". As explained in the method, students who did not already have a purpose were supported in identifying a purpose in life. It was interesting to note that the school counsellor observed that the students who already had a purpose were focused, in control of their behaviour, made practical choices, avoided giving in to peer pressure, were assertive, possessed leadership qualities and were less likely to be referred to the school counsellor for discipline-

Table 1. Student Perspectives on What Hinders Them in Identifying and Pursuing Purpose in Life.

Hindrances	Boys (n = 139) f	Girls (n = 41) f	Total (N = 180) f (%)
Personal			
Lack of time management skills	99	18	117 (65.00)
Procrastination	87	20	107 (59.44)
Overconfidence	86	10	96 (53.33)
Lack of confidence in oneself	45	25	70 (38.89)
Lack of planning	28	12	40 (22.22)
Environmental			
Peer pressure	95	17	112 (62.22)
Lack of role models	89	14	103 (57.22)
Lack of guidance from significant others	75	25	100 (55.56)
Family problems	42	22	64 (35.56)
Financial problems	30	13	43 (23.89)

Note. Multiple responses were obtained.

related issues than those students who did not have a purpose. In the value education classes, the students wrote their purpose in life. The content analysis of these statements yielded interesting findings. The students' statements of life purpose addressed multiple areas. These could be classified into career, relationships, personal development, social service, and monetary (refer to Table 3).

Career (85%) was closely interwoven with the students' life purpose and was found to be the most recurrently expressed area. Considering that the students were studying in ninth grade and had selected their subjects for the upcoming 10th board examinations, it was not surprising that their statements of life purpose revolved around making a career choice. Responses ranged from the typical "I want to be a doctor like my dad", to aspiring for highly specialised fields of study such as, "When I become an astrophysicist, my purpose in life will be accomplished". In fact, the life purpose statements of some students displayed a combination of awareness of specialty career areas and social sensitivity: "I want to be a forensic accounting expert so that I can investigate into money scams". "My purpose is to become a criminologist to help criminals change and become better". A few students (8%) also indicated that they would like to switch streams after tenth grade and take up a course of study that they enjoyed doing rather than their parent's choice.

The next most addressed area in students' statements of life purpose was relationships (62%). Some students included family relationships in their life purpose statements. Thus, one student's purpose in life was, "Good happy relationship with my family members". Students expressed a desire to serve or support family members: "To look after my parents"; "Help my siblings to become the best"; "I desperately want to grow up fast so that I can pay my parents back with gratitude". Students in stating their purpose in life also addressed relationships with friends. Thus, they said: "Have friends for a lifetime"; "Make my friends happy"; "Reach out to my friends when they need me". Some students' stated that their life purpose had to do with romantic relationships. Examples include: "Badly fall in love with a girl"; "My purpose in life is to fall in love with all the beautiful girls like Angelina Jolie, Emma Watson, Kristen Stewart, Miley Cyrus etc." One student said that her life purpose was to have a "Good relationship with my spouse". The life purpose statements of half of the students included personal development. For example, "To overcome failure"; "Develop the skill of patience and understanding"; "To be happy and content in whatever state of life"; "To feel proud of myself"; "Learn new things"; "Get good education and knowledge"; "To be admired and respected by those around me".

Table 2. Student's Development of a Purpose in Life.

Purpose	Boys (n=139) f	Girls (n=41) f	Total (N=180) f	%
Students who needed assistance to develop a purpose	96	21	117	65
Students who already had a purpose	43	20	63	35

Table 3. Areas Addressed in Students' Statements of Purpose.

Area	Boys (n = 139) f	Girls (n = 41) f	Total (N = 180) f (%)
Career	123	30	153 (85.00)
Relationships	102	10	112 (62.22)
Personal development	67	23	90 (50.00)
Social service	38	25	63 (35.00)
Money-related	22	2	22 (12.22)

Note. Multiple responses were obtained.

Students who indicated social service (35%) as their purpose in life, for instance, stated that they desired, "To get rid of global warming" ; "Betterment of the country"; "Remove the word poor from our country"; " I want to help all those who are not getting their necessary requirement".

These students were from affluent homes and were in possession of the latest expensive mobile phones, gaming and music equipment. Despite that or perhaps because of the comfort of affluence as a lifestyle, only 12% students identified a money-related life purpose. Examples of such a life purpose included "Get a good job and to have lots of money", "To make enough money to buy a good house, BMW car and have a good life".

Discussion

In this study the importance of purpose in the lives of students has been emphasised. There has been very little research done in this area. Therefore, this small exploratory study does make a contribution.

Interactive methodology, which entailed experiential activities, motivating stories, audio-visual presentations, debates on controversial life changing issues, examining lives of inspirational people, vignettes, role plays, workshops, quiet reflection, guided introspection, sharing of insights and peer mentoring, was used to elicit active participation from students during the sessions. The students were able to identify personal and environmental hindrances that limit their brainstorming possible solutions, listing out suitable and workable targets and devising a personal action plan to achieve higher goals. Students were also assisted in identifying principles, values, relationships, situations and goals that are of importance to them and that would contribute in enriching the quality of their lives. Guidelines have been proposed for creating a programme that would cater to students developing a positive purpose in life (refer to Box 2).

The areas of purpose identified by students in this study are in partial keeping with De Vogler and Ebersole's (1983) identification of eight categories into which most young people's purpose could be

Box 2. Guidelines for Creating a Programme to Help Students Develop a Purpose in Life.

Target group: Adolescent students aged 13-to-15 years.

Aims of the programme:

1. To make adolescent students aware of the need for a purpose in life.
2. To facilitate development of mission and vision statements that would promote the purpose.
3. To help student develop knowledge and skills required for effective development of a purpose in life.

Content of the programme:

1. Concept of Purpose in Life
2. Need/importance/ benefits/ advantages of a purpose in life
3. Differentiating between types of purposes: noble versus ignoble
4. Exploring the different areas that purposes can be classified into: relationships, career, personal development, social service, and money-related.
5. Identifying habits and behaviours that hinder the development of a purpose
6. Remediation of the habits and behaviours
7. Effect of purpose in life on self and others
8. Skills to be learned by adolescents: Introspection, observation, generation of possibilities, perspective taking, managing one's emotions, problem- solving.
9. The Role of educators/facilitators:
 - Teachers
 - School counsellors
 - Peer mentors

Methods that can be employed to disseminate the information:

An important aspect in a programme is the medium through which the information is put across to the participant. Some methods that can be used are role-playing, group activities, experiential activities, print and electronic media, sharing sessions, and debates on ethical issues.

The Purpose in Life programmes can be conducted in:

- Schools: The program can be conducted on the school premises since school is the place where the adolescents spend much of their time. Purpose of Life sessions could be integrated into the life skills/value education curriculum.
- Career Guidance Centres.
- Organisations working with adolescents (e.g., clubs, social groups, networking sites).

classified. These categories were relationships, service, growth, belief, existential-hedonistic, obtaining, expression, and understanding. Some of the students in this study identified a life purpose that entailed social service. Fry (1998) interviews with youth revealed that their "valuation systems," although predisposed toward self-enrichment is combined with concerns for others outside

of themselves, and interpreted as non-selfish and other-oriented.

Damon et al. (2003) have clarified that purpose plays a positive role in self-development as well as a generative one, helping a person to contribute to society. A sense of purpose gives students a feeling of accomplishment, knowing that they have positive goals to work toward, that is, a sense

of direction in life. A purpose gives adolescents a mission for their existence and a vision to look forward to every day. A purposeful life can help boost adolescents' confidence, increase good cheer, and allow them to monitor their behaviours towards achievement of positive goals. The benefits of such a purposeful life can then extend beyond adolescence into adulthood.

Conclusion

Adolescent students are faced with many aspects of purpose such as career, relationships, personal development, social service, and money-related. Since a large and valuable part of life is spent in school as students, the role of schools in helping students develop purpose in life is crucial. The knowledge, skills and attitudes that evolve along the path of discovery of their purpose, enables students to plan and decide, making choices not only about career and employment

but also about personal management and contribution towards society.

Recommendations

The following are a few recommendations with regard to the development of students' purpose in life:

- Conducting an in-depth Indian research on students' purpose in life across all levels (e.g., primary school, high school, college/university).
- Developing modules to make parents, teachers, school counsellors and administrators aware about the need and methods to assist students in developing a purpose in life.
- Including strategies for assisting students/youth in developing a worthwhile purpose in vocational and career guidance sessions.

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