

Expanding Education's Role in Shaping the Future

The Unseen Promise of Whole Child Education and Social-Emotional Learning

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Introduction: Looking Toward the Future

How can we strengthen the moral and ethical foundations of our society? How can we create healthier dialogue around contentious issues that would lead to mutual understanding and collaboration towards equitable solutions instead of a battle of ideas? What would it take to prepare young people to be citizens at this moment in history? How can we prepare next generations to embrace an unknown future? Many of us are asking ourselves: what is needed to ensure a brighter future, given our concern for what is happening in the world and its potential implications.

I don't see a stronger pathway to addressing these questions than through education. However, core subjects and other traditional areas of learning, as they are designed, will not build the foundations that will counter what is dividing us along political, racial, and economic lines. They will not empower students with the resilience and strength of humanity to face the challenges and hardships experienced in contemporary life. They will not engage and inspire students to define their identity and role in society, as they strive to make a positive impact in the lives of others and create the future.

What Does It Mean to Address “the Whole Child”?

The prospect of addressing “the whole child” in education has long held significant promise to provide answers to these critical questions and to respond to the needs of both students and society. This promise remains mostly unfulfilled, in part because it remains a vague ideal. Fulfilling this promise requires a fundamental shift of perspective in the way we think about what it means to support “the whole child”—a shift from looking at the whole child primarily as *a vague collection of parts* to one that recognizes the importance of addressing *the core of who students are*—in my terms, the deeper layers of their humanity.

I use the word “humanity” to bring more attention to the deeper, concrete, yet less tangible aspects of what makes us deeply human, so we may further address and understand what role education can play to support students. The seemingly vague nature of this term is important; we need to point to a way of engaging students that doesn't reduce their inner world to a set of social-emotional skills which often only addresses the outer layers of who they are. At the same time, it's important to apply rigor to how we define humanity so that we can design and implement substantive learning approaches that go beyond vague ideals and fluffy language about the role education can play.

I'll start by defining broadly how I understand what it means to support the deeper layers of what makes us human. Thereafter, I go into more detail and provide examples for effectively designing learning approaches that support this goal.

In a broad sense, supporting the deeper layers of students' humanity means addressing the core of how students engage with life. It means not only supporting students with what they are going to be able to *do*, but also for who they are going to *be*. It means providing a **space**

where students can together uncover, define, and explore who they are; make sense out of life and their role in being here; and deepen their connection with others and their community.

In the United States today most students are currently mostly left to their own devices to understand themselves, life, and their place in it. A few generations prior, society would dictate and hand us an understanding and roadmap of reality; praiseworthy or lamentable, this “map” gave youth a sense of clear guidelines for what it meant to be a boy, a girl, a man, a woman, what was expected of us, and what our future held for us. Even as these narratives and scripts imposed limitations, they gave many youth a sense of certainty and reference points for how to relate to their lives and futures.

Today those cultural narratives and scripts no longer hold the same weight and certainty in creating a sense of direction, leaving many, if not most, youth feeling lost, confused, and in the dark without the means needed to chart their own course. Consequently, teenagers may feel disconnected from themselves and lack direction for their future, leading to feelings of anxiety, depression, and isolation. This is a serious issue, we are failing to provide youth with the necessary tools to find their way in life and define who they are within a larger context of society.

As parents and educators, we have a need, perhaps an obligation, to provide students, (particularly during the transition from childhood to young adulthood), with means, with tools. These can guide young people find a compass from within, one that can replace the more narrow roadmaps of the past and enable them to define who they are and where they are going. To trust youth and create the space for them to find and define their own direction in life, can be one of the most empowering things we can do. It can dispel the often-unconscious idea that something is wrong or missing in their lives and make room for them to embrace and deal with the complexities of life.

Understanding the importance of providing students with this foundation is important. It makes it clear that education needs to go to the heart of what students need, not just to support them with the skills needed for success, but to engage them fully with life and how they can find their place in society. If we succeed we will have provided practical and meaningful approach that fosters the wellbeing of both individuals and society and cultivates a genuine sense of civic responsibility.

The Unseen Promise of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

An important step towards engaging the whole child has been the rapid advance and growing recognition of the importance of social-emotional learning. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the nation's leading organization for advancing SEL,

alone lists seventy-seven programs, all of which are backed in some fashion by evidence-based impact studies.¹

The world of SEL is often divided into “parts,” often referred to as “skills,” “competencies,” “attitudes,” etc. Some programs tackle a single part, such as emotions, and do it well. Other programs tackle a collection of skills such as self-awareness, empathy, communications, and collaboration. Such approaches aim to foster comprehensive growth, similar to the view that a liberal arts education leads to more well-rounded human beings. I don’t mean to suggest that there is anything wrong with either approach. We very much need these programs; when they are thoughtfully designed and implemented, they can have a great deal of value for students.

SEL programs arise out of an educational ethos that divides learning into different parts. Such an approach may do well in addressing distinct skills but does not truly address the “whole child.” These approaches may touch on discrete aspects of their inner world without addressing the core that makes it possible for all the parts to be integrated into oneself.

An example: programs that help students develop certain skills such as understanding and dealing with their emotions, empathy, or self-awareness, do not necessarily help them understand who they are, connect them with their overall lives, and give them direction for their future. Unless SEL skills are anchored in the core of the whole child, we are still perpetuating the same mechanist relationship to students’ lives that breaks everything down into pieces, but never makes it possible to connect everything into oneself.

The unseen potential of SEL lies in engaging the deeper aspects of student’s humanity that creates the connective tissue for all these different skills and “parts.” Without this deeper engagement, we limit SEL to a skillset needed to succeed in school, college, and career; and tragically we do not bridge the disconnect that exists when we don’t include the heart of students’ lives. But, if we can reframe SEL as part of the broader and deeper human journey of students uncovering their authentic identity, and making sense out of their lives together, we then bring forth its full potential in dispelling the sense of disconnectedness and isolation that many teenagers experience. As I will outline, this broadening of perspective has important implications for students to thrive, for their mental health, and for strengthening the foundations of society.

Experimenting with a new way forward

Around 2012, my wife Francesca and I set out to create a program to unlock this unseen promise—a program that would engage high-school students in an open exploration of their humanity. We first formed “co-creative labs” and worked closely with groups of students for two years to co-create a curriculum for a semester-long class. Students (and later teachers)

¹ CASEL. “Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs: CASEL Criteria Updates and Rationale.” Casel.org, 2020. https://casel.org/11_casel-program-criteria-rationale/?download=true.

helped us define the most important questions that would engage students' humanity, questions such as: "Who am I?...What is my purpose in life?...How do my choices impact myself and others?...How do I deal with right and wrong?...How can I find the courage to be myself?... Is life about me or is life about others? How can I have a broader perspective on challenging issues?...How do I relate to the future?" The QUESTion Project™ was born! We are now serving students in public high schools in New York City and Los Angeles, where they interactively confront and deal with the broader and bigger questions about life together.

Classroom teachers are trained to facilitate this daily course called the QUESTion Class™—a credit-bearing semester/year-long course which is delivered as a mandatory elective, advisory, or as part of the Health Class. The QUESTion Class utilizes a structured approach and methodology for high school students to thoughtfully explore some of life's most important questions. This collective educational experience encourages students to draw upon their own and each other's experiences and perspectives, fostering a sense of self-empowerment as well as co-exploration throughout the classroom. The class strengthens the relationship between educators and students, at its best creating an environment of trust and of being on a common journey of making sense out of life together.

When students have these outlets for their humanity, I am amazed by the depth of their authenticity and wisdom. Some of the insights they express, I would have assumed could only be arrived at after decades of life experience.

Having worked closely with hundreds of students and educators to co-create the QUESTion Class and having served over 12,000 students, we can now look back at lessons learned from this experimental ground. We've uncovered three definitive areas of development that go to the heart of students' humanity, that help define who they are and make sense out of life: Identity, Agency, Purpose. In our approach with public high school students, we addressed the development of all three in a context of connectedness. While these are not the only areas that address the core of how students relate to their life experience, they are critical to any comprehensive approach to SEL, and supporting the whole child.

At the Core of the Whole Child: Identity, Agency, and Purpose

In this section, I explore further how Identity, Agency, and Purpose, are foundational components of growth that touch on the core of what makes us human—and that, accordingly, need learning methods that are rigorous and profound. Supporting the whole child goes beyond developing a range of skills like empathy, self-awareness, managing relationships, and other skills. Supporting the whole child means making space for the underlying humanity that gives these skills meaning.

1. Developing an Authentic Identity

At the core of students' humanity is how they define and understand who they are—their identity—without which they are like a ship without a rudder.

On a visit to the High School of Fashion Industries, a public school in Manhattan, I witnessed an inspiring real-life example of the power of authentic identity. The activity that day in the QUESTion Class curriculum was “The River of Life.” Students were invited to draw a river with twists and turns representing their life journey from birth to the present. As part of this activity, the students reflected on which turns in the river (positive or negative) were based on things that happened to them and which turns on choices they made. After they assessed how their own choices impacted the river’s direction, they thought about their agency to shape the future course of that river.

That day, a fourteen-year-old girl shared the content of her river—a life journey that was marked by one overwhelming tragedy after another. The class listened with rapt attention, and in wonder, as this girl described repeated loss, neglect, depression, and despair, while radiating positivity and openness with no sense of self-pity or victimization.

When she was done, I asked, “How is it that you’re describing a journey that has so much pain and suffering and you are expressing so much lightness and happiness as you’re sharing this with us?” Without hesitation she replied, “At one point I realized I had to hold onto who I was, otherwise these things that were happening to me were going to turn me into someone I did not want to be.”

An authentic sense of who she was deep down became a source of strength for dealing with life’s adversity and traumatic experiences and enabled this brave teenager to be the author of her own life. Like this girl, I’ve seen many students as they connect with who they are, shift their relationship to challenging or traumatic events, from something that defines who they are, to something that has happened to them, that they can speak to with more distance and objectivity.

Authentic identity is not only an essential foundation for dealing with the challenges and traumas of life, but it is also a foundation for defining a direction for a life of connectedness and purpose.

Designing methods to support the development of identity means giving students space to engage with the deeper facets of who they are—their aspirations, confusion, fears, hopes, interests, intuitions, passions; a space where they can engage in defining who they genuinely are and who they want to become; and a space where they can make sense out of life, tackle its complexity, think for themselves, and explore their true connection to society and the role they will play as citizens in the world.

In doing so, we must take into account that identity changes over time; respect the seemingly static shape of individual identity at different stages of growth and development; recognize that our identity is created both autonomously, and collectively in our reflection and interactions with others; and understand that there are different layers and levels to identity, some deeply defining (like standing for justice), and others (like having an interest in a particular genre of

music) perhaps less so. We must also take into account that an aspect of our identity may be so profound and vast that we will never fully be able to reduce it to any kind of definition.

There is so much potential when we engage the deeper aspects of students' identity that often remain hidden when not given outlets to develop. Ms. Hudson, a Health teacher at the Bronx High School of Law and Community Service who has an amazing ability to make the QUESTion Class real and care for the wellbeing of students, discovered this her first year teaching the QUESTion Class:

It was the kids who won me over, because the students were the ones that I saw break out of a shell that I didn't even know was there; blossom into someone that was underneath these layers. . . There were a couple of things that I saw in the students that . . . made me realize some students had so much more depth . . . than I even realized. This helps teachers really be aware of how even we . . . are putting students in a box and not realizing, whoa, once I take that box away, look how deep they are, look how thoughtful they are, how wonderful they are.

If we don't provide these kinds of spaces for students to explore and define who they are, then identity becomes a self-image, a set of ideas or labels, a role they've adopted, or an abstraction rather than an expression of their authentic selves. That disconnection from their own self can undoubtedly become a source of depression and other forms of emotional distress.

The emotional consequences of not supporting students to connect with who they are was conveyed by a group of students at Alliance Marine - Innovation & Technology 6-12 Complex, a high school in Los Angeles. After a first year in the QUESTion Class, we met with students to ask what they felt would be helpful for them the following year. They started to speak about how the program helped them deal with depression, proposing that what was needed was to bring the program to other schools. Thinking they had misunderstood what we were asking, I added, "yes, of course, but what would be helpful next for all of *you*?" They responded even more forcefully about bringing the class to others, with some sharing their sadness about friends they knew in other schools who had committed suicide, saying they could have been helped if they had had the same space they had to reflect on their lives.

Ms. Blades, a Social Studies and QUESTion Class teacher at the Bronx Center for Science and Mathematics, who has a magical ability to empower students to think for themselves shared a similar observation. She told us that when students develop a sense of identity and how they "fit into the world" in the class, she has seen it help students who had contemplated committing suicide.

Not all approaches to supporting students' identity connect them with who they are in this profound way. Some approaches can be unproductive and even harmful. As more and more educators recognize the fundamental importance of supporting identity development during the teenage years, there is a tendency to reduce identity to only its most tangible aspects. As a

result, there is a great danger that instead of supporting students in discovering who they are, we inadvertently impose ideas, and limit the space for them to authentically develop.

The main way I see this happening in schools: when identity is reduced to one or a set of fixed and static labels sometimes with children as young as ten. With such approaches, we are unknowingly limiting the space for children to explore and further develop the less tangible aspects of who they are, and to loosely experiment with certain labels to explore what aspects of those labels resonate with them. Students do not need to pin down their identity; they need the space to discover it and allow it to keep unfolding rather than pinning it down.

A friend in New York City told me that her ten-year-old daughter was asked at school to choose an affinity group based on religion. When she said she didn't know if she believed in God, the teacher told her she was an atheist, guiding her to the corresponding side of the room and emailing her that evening: "Congratulations you are an atheist, don't be afraid, you should be proud of that!"

Another parent told me their eleven-year-old son was told he was "non-binary" when he expressed, upon first being asked what gender he identified with, that he was unsure how he felt about his gender. There is obviously a delicate line here: we want to create space for children to have room to explore and express different perspectives and experiences of gender; but it can be harmful when we reduce the profound process of identity formation to a set of labels. That boy's confusion about gender may have been a temporary confusion about gender and not an expression of something permanent and unchangeable. Students need space and time to define that for themselves.

While students may need to experiment with different labels and images to see what fits, it is limiting to relate to their experimentation as an end point. Doing so undermines the space for identity to unfold and may do irreversible emotional or even physical damage. Also, we must take into account that identity formation goes beyond labels that we can use to define who we are. It also involves the deeper currents of how we relate to ourselves, to others, and to life. If we address only the layers of identity that we can attach labels to, we fail to provide an antidote to the sense of isolation, separation, and depression that teenagers can experience when they don't feel seen and don't have an authentic sense of who they are beyond all those labels.

Beyond question, this is a challenging time for our youth to make sense out of life and who they are. In the US, we are in a large part no longer bound by the fixed narratives and scripts that—for better or worse—gave us direction in the past. At the same time, we are in an era in which we are constantly bombarded with images and messages that advocate, entice, or urge us to follow a particular look and act in a particular way—and in which, accordingly, youth are tempted to project a self-image on social media that might not be true to who they are.

Our ability to make sense out of life is undermined even further by the decreasing trust in the media's portrayal of facts and events, and the unbelievable advance of AI which will make it

even more difficult to identify what is authentic. We have yet to see the implication on a personal and global scale of the advance of the AI technology that makes it possible to make convincing but completely fake videos that portray events that never happened, things that were never said, and intentions that were never expressed. Just recently we have gained access to AI capacities that will in seconds supply for free to anyone a birthday speech, a note of apology, a letter of college application, essays, art, photos, songs, poems, automatic replies to emails, and many other things to come. There is a service that now allows us to “Need a friend? Create one now” and with the advance of virtual reality we will be able to spend time in alternate realities that might seem much more favorable than our own.

This is a challenge to both society and to our youths’ abilities to be grounded in reality and who they really are. It is also a time of incredible opportunity: as the seas of our outer world become more turbulent and disorienting, it becomes more obvious that we need to look within to connect with and be anchored in our authentic identity.

When students uncover and develop an authentic sense of who they are, it creates a solid foundation for dealing with the challenges of life and meeting the future with inspiration, connectedness, and purpose. An authentic identity that arises naturally out of students’ humanity, in contrast to a self-image or the expectations of others, holds the most promise for society and for meeting this moment in history; it becomes a foundation for wholesome character and citizenry to arise, develop, and congeal.

2. Strengthening Agency

Agency is another core aspect of students’ humanity. It gives them strength to develop and express the different dimensions of their authentic identity, their curiosity, their passion, their care.

Connecting students to the depth of their agency is essential to help them take their lives into their own hands, particularly as they make the transition from teenager to young adult. At its fullest potential, it can inspire their creativity, care, passion, and interest to bring out the best in themselves, to create their lives, and to contribute to society in a way that aligns with the deepest stirrings within them. It can open a space of ongoing possibilities.

The consequences of not supporting and strengthening students’ agency is highlighted in research by Harvard University professors, Howard Gardner and Wendy Fischman. Through over 100 interviews with undergraduate students, they identified four main mindsets with which students related to the purpose and value of college.

- The first is an “Inertial Mindset” where students mainly relate to being in school because it is a path that has been laid for them by others, without much agency of their own.
- The second is a “Transactional Mindset” where students relate to a college degree mainly as a means to an end, a way to earn a degree, that will in turn provide them with a way to make a better living.

- The third is an “Exploratory Mindset” where students relate to college mainly as a place to learn and to grow.
- And finally, a “Transformational Mindset” where students’ main interest is in the possibility of transforming their lives, their aspirations, their values and ties to others.

Fischman and Gardner’s research revealed that almost 50% of students were identified as predominantly having one of the first two mindsets (Inertial 3% and Transactional 45%).² These statistics reflect the lack of support for the deeper agency of students particularly during their high school years. Of course, one contributing factor is a societal transactional mindset; it conveys the importance of getting into the best college we can for the doors that it will open for us in the future (versus for how we might change, grow or even transform ourselves). That mindset also infuses the world of educators in high school where so much is based on achievement to get into the best college, without any thought to what is the best college for a particular student.

The quest for growth and transformation are an inherent part of the human journey. If we don’t give students greater outlets for these, we don’t empower the agency towards a natural part of their human unfolding. Students in high school are looking to understand how their learning connects to who they are and who they want to become. And because there is little support for that, they may not even be aware of what can be a quiet curiosity or seeking within them. Our schools need to provide that support otherwise students will be lacking the self-knowledge and agency that will allow them to have appropriate challenges and opportunities after high school.

This point was echoed by Karla Perez, a high-achieving, first-generation high school graduate who was one of the first students to take the QUESTion Class. After taking the QUESTion Class, she told us, “I’ve been taught science, all these theories, all these other subjects and I feel . . . okay . . . these are essential, but what am I going to do with these essential subjects to become the person I want to be in life? It’s just not enough . . .”

Karla already had the drive to study and do well in school as a foundation for a career. By deepening her understanding of who she was, she developed another level of agency—to shape the direction of her own life beyond getting a job. Early comments like these confirmed the importance of anchoring students’ learning in a foundation of who they are and who they are going to become. Karla recently earned a master’s degree in public health and is a Health Administrative Fellow at Hartford Healthcare, and she remains ever curious about where this life journey is leading her.

² Fischman, Wendy and Gardner, Howard. *The Real World of College: What Higher Education Is and What It Can Be*. (MIT Press, 2022)

In the US, one of the most influential organizations that is shifting the paradigm on student agency is [Education Reimagined](#). Members of this organization are playing a key role in defining and spreading a broad vision for a “Learner-Centered Approach” to education, where students have autonomy and are at the center of their own learning. Through their efforts, they are shedding light on the importance of this work—the methods and the educators who are bringing it to life—and they are catalyzing a movement that expands our approach to education and transforms how students relate to their own learning.

The early stages of the learner-centered movement in schools will likely be focused mostly on students being at the center of their own learning. The fullest potential of this movement is for students to take their *lives* and futures into their own hands in the profound way I’m detailing—a level of agency that is often overlooked.

On a visit to Alliance Marine Innovation & Technology 6-12 Complex in Los Angeles, I saw evidence of the power of this deeper level of agency. We had invited students who were in The QUESTion Class to attend a follow-up training session with teachers. Maria, a tenth-grade student, bursting with excitement, jumped out of her chair and announced to the group, “I had a major breakthrough in this class!” She did not elaborate, keeping us all in suspense, and prompting me to finally ask “So, what was the breakthrough?” She replied passionately, with a big smile, “I realized that I am completely confused about life!”

Naturally, all of us in the training were struck by this joyful declaration from a 15-year-old. I asked her to explain why she described her confusion as a breakthrough when most people would see it as a problem. She explained that, until that point, she had allowed other people’s ideas to determine what she should do in life. Over the course of the QUESTion Class, she realized for the first time that she could think about life for herself; even though she was confused, it didn’t matter as she was free to consider her own life and future. She saw also that her peers too were confused about life, so she was not the only one, “We’re only fifteen years old. We don’t have to have it all figured out!”

This anecdote illustrates the power of being explicit with students: we do not have answers to all the important questions about life; it is ok for students not to know and be confused; and we trust and respect them to explore and search for answers themselves. In a world where there is so much societal pressure to have it all figured out, it can easily lead youth to simply “fit in,” to be, and to do, what is expected of them. “Fitting in” disconnects youth from who they are and undermines their agency. This can lead them to feel anxious and depressed, without a way to even understand why they feel that way. Students thrive in an inspiring and safe environment where they can explore life with their peers—free from the pressure and false idea that we need to have it all figured out.

When students feel they have the space to be agents of their own lives, they achieve breakthroughs in growth and learning. By providing students age-appropriate outlets to develop this kind of autonomy, we will catalyze students who feel empowered to be who they

are, engage authentically with their lives, with purpose, in a context that includes others. That too is foundational for a healthy society.

3. Engaging with Purpose

Purpose connects students' identity to others and to a larger context; it brings a meaningful sense of direction to their agency.

“The biggest problem growing up today is not actually stress; it’s meaninglessness.”
—William Damon, Stanford University

William Damon’s quote conveys the foundational importance of purpose in shaping young lives. His definition of purpose—one that is referenced broadly—is “An active commitment to accomplish aims that are meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self.” Having studied different stages of development from adolescence to advanced age, Damon found that at every stage “purpose stands out as a key to positive living” and for adolescents, that “purpose is the pre-eminent long-term motivator of learning and achievement.” This clear definition of purpose is essential; it provides a shared way to understand what external expressions of purpose look like.

Understanding the internal movement of purpose, along with the conditions for its development, is also important, even as it is harder to delineate. Bringing more clarity will make it possible to better understand and support student growth. Purpose is such a deep and seemingly elusive aspect of life that it can easily be reduced to a single thing, such as an idea, feeling, or cause; or to something static that never changes. As with identity, we need to embrace the vastness of what purpose might mean, offer students ample space for investigation, and respect their capacity to tackle the mystery and complexity of how they might engage with purpose.

Like identity, purpose has different layers. It might be reflected in the outer layers of our actions, or in invisible yet highly influential inner layers that take the form of vision, inspiration, concern, intuition, joy, fun, or even love. On the outer layers, it can be expressed in an activity, or a cause. On a deeper level it can be experienced as something we intuit with a dimension that is so deep that we may never be able to fully put into words. The call to purpose in students may be quite strong, yet deeply interior, perhaps appearing to someone else externally as if there is very little movement towards purpose. Giving students outlets to explore and pursue purpose is a powerful way to connect them with their own lives and bring out the less tangible aspects of their humanity.

This process became evident on a visit to Bronx Leadership Academy where Ms. Salim was teaching the QUESTion Class for the first time. With an unwavering care for students to connect with themselves, Ms. Salim asked students to consider and create a list of things they do regularly in their lives—activities or pursuits that they feel have purpose. One student leaning

back in his chair, did not want to speak for himself, but was happy for someone else to share the first item on his list, “I get up every morning.” On the surface, one might assume that this student didn’t have much that gave him purpose. As the lesson went on, Ms. Salim asked students to reflect on each item on their list and to explain why each item gave them purpose. This student’s answer followed “because I can be productive.” Ms. Salim then challenged students to go deeper and ask why, again and again, to get at the underlying reason this was giving them purpose. I watched in a small group how this student started without an idea of how to answer, and then saying things like “so I can get a job...so I can support myself...” followed by more why’s to which he finally replied, “Because I have a vision that I want to bring out.” In a 45-minute class period he and other students had an opportunity to find a deeper connection to purpose within them—a connection that can provide them with intrinsic motivation, and that might conceivably take decades to bring out (as it had for me). We all need concrete and direct outlets to connect with and become aware of the less tangible side of purpose that moves us, otherwise it’s easy for it to remain obscure.

Aaron Hurst, author of *Purpose Economy*, makes a powerful distinction between a transactional mindset and a purpose mindset. The word “mindset” is useful because it captures the reality that even as purpose takes concrete forms, it is not a static “object;” it can be something that changes over time. It can be something we find, yet it can also be something that we create. It can be something that is already present in us that builds over time. For instance, when students are eager to learn, are they not following a call to purpose in that stage of their lives? If we are seeking purpose, isn't the very act of seeking it an expression of purpose itself? Similarly, if we are exploring who we are and how we can create integrity between who we are and what we do, are we not following the call of purpose?

It is important not to impose our ideas about what purpose should look or feel like. If something like inspiration or love are drivers of purpose within us, wouldn’t it make sense that it might manifest in more ways than a single expression?

Passion and inspiration are often seen as foundational elements of purpose. While these can be helpful indicators of purpose, there is a risk in focusing too much on those alone. Approaches that reduce purpose to a cause or to something that inspires us can be helpful in temporarily connecting some students with the inner stirrings of purpose. However, focusing only on the external form of purpose (the cause), or on a singular feeling (passion or inspiration), is a limited approach. It can potentially undermine students' investigations by leading them to conclude that they do not or cannot have an authentic relationship with purpose—if they have not found their inspiration or “cause.” Presenting a singular perspective on purpose can also detract from students' abilities to attune to the quiet promptings of purpose within them ...promptings that may change their direction over time and manifest itself in a completely different way.

Therefore, when designing approaches, it’s helpful not to focus only on the outer expressions of purpose, but also to help students develop an authentic relationship to purpose. The goal is not for students to have the answer but to have a space to unfold their relationship to purpose. As

one girl affirmed powerfully in one of the classes, “I’m only fourteen years old, I’m not supposed to know what my purpose is, this is a place to learn!”

If we only address aspects of the whole child that can be labeled and defined, if we don’t make room for the complexity and uncertainty that make room for the deeper layers of purpose, we do students a disservice. Britney Kiki was one of the first public high school students to take the QUESTion class at Bronx Center for Science and Mathematics. She has a magical capacity to express herself:

We must learn to be comfortable being uncomfortable and have faith in the uncertainty of the Universe. The QUESTion Class holds a vision, an agenda that is boundless and unstructured, so much so that we cannot help but to be empowered by all that we have yet to learn. In that vacuum is where we drift ever so content in being our unapologetic, uncoerced selves. It is not the job of an educator to devise our paths or constrict others, but to introduce us to ideas, prompt our inquiry about the extent of reality and for that matter, the loopholes in perception. Embracing this "vision" liberates students and adults alike. May we look up to the sky with the desire to be just as confident as the pastel blue that stains it so proud and so vibrant, knowing that we are just as boundless in our own reality.

A deep sense of purpose and confidence to contribute, grounded in humility and leaving room for uncertainty, is a foundational quality of citizens who are able to care for the greater good. It is essential for us to be able to work together to address and respond to a rapidly changing, and increasingly complex world. If we don’t achieve this through education, how else would we achieve it?

4. A Wholistic View of Identity, Agency, and Purpose

In the section above, I explored the importance of providing outlets for the development of identity, agency, and purpose as core aspects of the whole child. It's important to engage these aspects of the students’ lives as one integrated whole and not relate to them only as separate parts.

For example, for many young people, purpose and inspiration may not emerge until they have a stronger sense of their identity—of who they are. Some may feel inspiration for something, but these feelings may come and go. They may feel at a loss if they don’t have the agency, confidence, and sense of power that they can truly make a difference.

I remember when I first became aware of the relationship between identity and purpose. Courtney, a junior, expressed how her level of confidence in pursuing a life of purpose had increased tremendously after having taken the QUESTion Class. She felt it was strange because she still had no idea what she was going to do after she graduated. When I asked her to tell me more, she said that she had learned so much about herself, that this had given her a very strong

sense of direction, purpose, and feeling that her life mattered. She added that this had given her confidence to shape her own life and future.

Purpose informed by self-knowledge and the agency to engage all facets of the self can bring out the best that we have to give, fulfilling our greatest vision and highest ideals. Psychologist, Seana Moran, argues that those who integrate these facets of themselves create a self-motivating, self-directing, self-regulating “compass” that focuses perception of purpose on opportunities to contribute to society in a self-chosen way.³

When we have a strong sense of who we are and we have the agency and confidence to take responsibility for our own lives, this state of affairs strengthens our capacity to shape our own lives and future. We are able to feel nuances of change within and can expand and adapt our sense of purpose and direction over time. Otherwise, we risk clinging too long to something that once inspired us, unaware of an inner call to move forward in ways that will have more impact. Purpose, unaccompanied by self-knowledge and a sense of power to act, can turn into a static idea or be undermined by other motives (e.g., power, recognition). Our purpose, informed by ongoing self-discovery, can unfold as we grow in ways that we would not have expected and could not have planned for.

Agency plays an important role in allowing our identity to unfold. We can often discover more about who we are by having the strength and courage to simply be ourselves. Students often describe the QUESTion Class as a place to “find out and be who you are.” I have come to understand these statements in two ways.

The first: by tackling some of the most important questions about life together, students find out a lot about how they think, feel, and relate to these topics—just as a values clarification approach would help students know more about who they are.

The second: when students are exploring their thoughts, values, feelings, and inner lives in a context where their life is entirely in their own hands, they activate what I consider one of the most profound forms of agency, not only engaging with their thoughts, feelings, and experience but also sensing the core of who they are before the specific defining aspects that may arise from it.

Thus, supporting the development of identity involves two facets: creating space for students to uncover the specifics of who they are (such as thoughts, values, fears, likes, dislikes, passion, inspiration); and connecting them with the center of the self that is exploring, defining, finding its way in life. If we make it about the content alone, we inadvertently leave out the source of agency that reflects the intangible core of who we are.

³ Moran, Seana. “Life Purpose in Youth: Turning Potential into a Lifelong Pursuit of Prosocial Contribution.” *Journal for the education of the gifted* 43, no. 1 (2020): 38–60.

I heard a powerful expression of this from Alexander Uzobuife, a student at the Bronx Center for Science and Mathematics. That's where Ms. Blades facilitates the QUESTion Class, with an openness and curiosity that is contagious and creates an empowering space where students are deeply empowered to think for themselves:

I remember one day I had stated my opinion on a certain topic, and Ms. Blades asked me, "Why is that your opinion?" I was immediately caught off-guard. I embarrassingly responded with "I don't know. I just do." No teacher has ever asked me to look within myself. I thought back to my opinion and wondered what influence could have brought me to that opinion. Could it have been religion? Family beliefs? Political beliefs?

*The truth is we have a lot of influences that lead us to a certain belief. In the QUESTion Class, I am met with this constant questioning/thinking about the way I think. In some classes, this would be a bad thing, but in the QUESTion Class, something like this is valued. **To be thrown into such a metacognitive state and internalizing everything within me allows me to know myself more as a human being.** After expanding my way of thinking, it also made me expand the way that I am. Once removing this limit, I was able to take more risks with my life. Do things that I had always been afraid to do. Once you get rid of this limit, you have freed yourself from yourself.*

Making sense out of life together

Just as "the whole child" is more than a collection of separate parts, so the classroom is not just a collection of separate students.

When students engage together in defining aspects of their development, this process brings light to their common humanity. Students can not only hear the different ideas and experiences of their peers, they can also recognize the common human questions, concerns, hopes, fears, vulnerability, and quest to make sense out of their lives and futures.

The recognition of our common human journey is a foundation for the natural unfolding of ethics, respect for others, inclusivity, and citizenry.

After the first year he taught the QUESTion Class, Mr. Sandrowicz, a teacher of math and dean at TAPCO high school in the Bronx, told me: "I had students in different gangs who outside the class were fighting each other, but in the class, started to see that they are dealing with the same challenges in life, that they are not that different, which brought them together." Mr. Sandrowicz's class shows the kinds of breakthroughs that are possible when teachers demonstrate their care for students and create a space for students to be themselves and listen to each other.

Similarly, Ms. Blades, a social studies teacher at Bronx Center for Science and Mathematics, said during the first year teaching the QUESTion Class “I knew something important was happening when I saw a boy who had been bullying another boy, both sitting together and having a real conversation about the topic.”

In Mr. DeLeo’s class at Bronx Latin High School, I’ve been struck by the quality of attention and presence that has been an outcome of students exploring life together with vulnerability, curiosity, and without concern to have the “right answer.” Mr. DeLeo has a disarming authenticity and depth that creates a powerful openness, intimacy, and profound engagement in the QUESTion Class. Students listen to each other and come together in a way that fills me with tremendous hope and joy for what is possible.

This kind of intimacy and vulnerability among teenagers is something that generally happens only between very close friends and family members. Thus, there are big implications for society when students are able to recognize each other’s humanity in a larger context with peers with whom they would not usually associate. Creating this space in schools makes it possible to create a structure and process that supports authentic and rigorous exploration together; it also offers a fitting opportunity to make this work available broadly. This is particularly important in a Western context, where there is a strong focus on individual achievement—one that can obscure our natural connections to each other, and the recognition that we are in this journey together.

Expanding the Role of Teachers

To truly support the whole child and engage the deeper layers of humanity, we need to reimagine the role of the teacher and the training needed. When teachers are being educated, we need to bring more clarity to what it means to support the whole child and to the potential impact that is possible. We then need to offer methods that will support that impact. And finally, we need a space for teachers to uncover how their humanity can strengthen and align with those methods—each teacher in his or her own unique ways.

Working closely with about a hundred teachers through the QUESTion Class and seeing the different ways they engaged students’ humanity and brought out the best in students, gave us a greater understanding of the role of the teacher. We saw that it was possible to devote the same depth and rigor to training teachers that we had applied to creating the QUESTion Class curriculum. We embarked on a journey of distilling all the insights that came out of our work with teachers into nine core competencies for engaging students’ humanity, and refined those competencies in an in-depth, year-long process with a group of 12 teachers. The nine core competencies now serve to make clear the deeper potential that is possible with students; to uncover methods that bring forth that potential, and to define ways a teacher’s own humanity can support those methods.

As an example, the core competency of “**Leading with our humanity**” came out of observing the impact teachers had when they brought their humanity to their classroom facilitation—all

in their own unique ways. The competency focuses on the transformative power of teachers leading with care, passion, love, inspiration, curiosity, etc. Bringing forward their humanity as teachers, dissolves the confines of more traditional teaching roles; it creates a space for authenticity, realness, and vulnerability, where students can truly engage with their own lives. It provides teachers with the skills and the disposition to balance being an authority—a steward of the classroom environment—while also being a co-explorer with students.

As another example, the competency “**Making it Real**” explores how to create a space for genuine exploration. Students implicate themselves by bringing their life experiences to the conversation, while at the same time developing intellectual understanding and critical thinking, holding the different perspectives in the room, and embracing the complexity inherent in many of the topics. When engaging with some of the most important questions about life, a teachers’ ability to make it real and relevant to students is critical. Discussions of important human questions can easily veer too much into the philosophical or too much towards the personal. The inspiration behind this competency came from witnessing the impact some of our teachers had, and the difference it made, when they engaged students in more authentic reflections on their lives.

As one more example, the competency “**Supporting Open Inquiry—Making Room for the Unknown**” enables teachers to create a space that is free of judgment and imposed ideas; students feel they can think for themselves and tackle even the toughest questions in life, without needing to have the right answers. When this space is consciously created for students, it can significantly expand their agency and depth of exploration. It conveys to students the respect we have for them, and the trust that they can grapple with challenging questions about who they are, who they want to be, and how they want to shape their future. This competency came out of having observed teachers who found it challenging not to be leading students to specific ideas or conclusions, or who held too firmly their own answers about life with too much certainty and inadvertently limited the space of exploration for students.

These and the other competencies help create an authentic space for students to engage with and express their humanity and not feel that they are merely doing an exercise or being led to a particular end point. Ultimately, supporting the role of the teacher is important—not just for programs that tackle SEL or character development, but also for other subject areas. This makes it possible for teachers to support the core of the whole child.

Ms. Rosenbaum is a science teacher at Bronx Latin High School. Her impact on students has been so powerful that she received the Sloan Award for Excellence in Teaching regarded as the “Nobel Prize of Public Service.” She shared with me that she now finds many ways to engage students' humanity not just in the QUESTion Class but also in her traditional courses. In a geology lesson, when a student brought up a fear of volcanos, she had students reflect on the bigger picture and on the role of fear in their lives, including in the face of something as awesome and terrifying as a volcano. In her AP Environmental Science class, when a student asked her, "Knowing about all these terrible things you teach us about, how do you stay sane?"

Ms. Rosenbaum told me, "The question floored me. I had to stop and tap into our humanity then. I told her I am sane in the face of all the environmental crises that I know about because teaching others about it gives me hope. I am not without fear, but I choose to not let fear stop me. I told her that she is the reason I stay sane. The QUESTion Project made me comfortable enough to be vulnerable like that . . . and let the students know how much I need them, too."

There is little pedagogy that is focused on the skills and methods teachers can implement to engage the deeper layers of what makes us human. Incorporating this into the way we train teachers is a fundamental aspect of genuinely addressing the whole child and expanding the role of the teacher.

Implications for our Society and Public Discourse

Truly engaging the whole child has implications that are significant not only to the individual but also to the broader society. If we do not address this gap in education, the consequences will continue to be reflected in our public discourse and the health of our society. This is evident in issues such as the growing political tension, gun violence, and the alarming rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide among young people.

The lack of a sense of a common human journey in society can be traced back to the space that is missing in the school day for students to see and connect with each other beyond their differences. When ideas, values, identity, and even multiculturalism are static skills to develop and are not anchored in our individual and collective humanity, they can end up being elements that divide rather than unite us in our common human journey.

Connecting sensitive or controversial topics—such as gun control, abortion, and race—to our humanity, is an antidote to the divisive and destructive public discourse in our nation. When we don't connect these issues to our humanity, they can become points of contention that we hold on to too rigidly. Our humanity allows us to acknowledge the complexity and even paradoxical nature of these issues, instead of reducing ourselves (and others!) to a single point of view. By connecting to our humanity and to each other, we can move away from extremes, stop painting the other side in the worst light possible, and embrace the nuances and at times paradoxical nature of these issues.

The strength of our society will not be determined by aligning everyone in the same values, purpose, or way of thinking, but rather by having a stronger recognition of a shared humanity that can bring more care for the greater good. This approach will increase our collective understanding and appreciation of the diverse perspectives on issues we face, and the complexities they involve.

Recognizing each other's humanity makes it harder for us to demonize the other side or reduce it to what we see as its most extreme and negative perspective. It allows us to recognize the fears and attachments we may have and makes more space to explore what is best for the greater good. It allows us to recognize that there is often not a single solution to every

situation, even if we sometimes have no choice but to implement policy in a singular way. Most importantly, it creates a context where we can come together and discover what is best for society as a whole. Just as two parents need to work together to determine what is best for their child, we must come together to find the best outcome for our collective future.

It is unfortunate when the reality—and even the beauty—of differing perspectives and the inherent complexity is obscured by a singular position (which happens so often). A rigid relationship to ideas or values—whether as a way to feel secure that we are on the right side, a way to feel better than others, a way to avoid complexity, or even a way to feel like we are helping others—can often lead to limiting or even undermining outcomes.

I witnessed a powerful example of this with a teacher of the QUESTion Class at a public high school in the Bronx. I had visited this teacher's class a couple of times. It was the only class where students were exploring the topics without vulnerability and in a way that was disconnected from who they were. That day, the topic was “Is life about me? Is life about others?” I arrived after class and asked the teacher how it went. She told me, “It was challenging, but I got students to the right answer...that life is about others.” This well-intentioned and kind teacher was unwittingly using the curriculum to bring students to the values that she had come to, instead of creating space for them to use their own ideas, intuition, and conscience to make sense of a topic that we all struggle to find our way with.

Towards the end of the semester, this young teacher with a great deal of courage and care for the students, eventually realized she was undermining the space for them to grow by imposing her ideas (in this case a positive but possibly rigid idea she had that life was about others). Her insight resulted in a major breakthrough in the class.

When students have that space to explore, they lead with their curiosity rather than their desire to affirm what they know. Their ability to come together does not depend on sharing the same ideas. In fact, a common human desire to understand life and difficult questions can bring them together in a much deeper way. This has important implications for society. We all need space to ongoingly explore our ideas and values, rather than to feel that we are meant to conform to external norms or have to assert what we know in order to protect our beliefs.

Embedding this work in our schools and engaging students in their life journey together inherently dissolves the boundaries between students and makes them more open to each other's views. In fact, the comment we receive more than any other in the end-of-class surveys is how much they appreciate learning the perspectives and experiences of their peers, and how those exchanges have made them more open. When students have space to make sense out of life in a larger context, where it is not just about each alone, it creates a common ground where they are interested in hearing the thoughts of their peers, in a shared journey of making sense out of life together.

Towards a new future

Educators recognize the urgent need for SEL and whole child education because of the challenges students are currently facing. The pandemic has only made more urgent a need within the education system that has been neglected for far too long—a need that is not only about solving the challenges students face but about building the foundations for a healthy and thriving self and society.

We don't have to wait until the entire education system is revolutionized to make this shift. We can make a profound difference by expanding our view of what students need, placing their humanity at the center of the learning process, as a foundation upon which they can develop SEL and academic skills and learn and integrate content.

Create structured approaches and spaces for students to thrive—this stance must be included during the school day and be regarded with the same importance as other core subjects, so that it becomes an integral part of students' school lives, just like English and math.

We also need to train teachers to recognize the potential of students to uncover and express their humanity, and to develop the methods and dispositions that will support that.

Ultimately, I believe it's important to help catalyze a new subject field in education. We must thoughtfully curate this field with different age-appropriate programs and approaches that will support students in engaging core aspects of their humanity at every stage of their educational journey.

Conclusion

My intention in writing this paper has been to bring light to a deeper understanding of what it means to support “the whole child” and to show that it is possible to do this now, in ways that are thoughtful, concrete, and substantive. This approach can not only impact the wellbeing and development of students, but also strengthen the human foundations of democracy; it can bring more tolerance, understanding, connectedness, interest, and care for the common good.

It's not possible to meet the needs of this moment in history and prepare the next generation for the future without making the shift of perspective in education that I'm pointing to here. This is a bold statement which I make deliberately—as it's important for all of us to consider deeply what it would take to prepare the next generation for the times that we are living in, and the times that we cannot foresee.

The depth of authenticity, agency, care, connectedness, and wisdom are foundational for a thriving society; they are inherent in students and need outlets for expression. Truly focusing on the whole child requires a seismic shift in our approach to education: connecting the various aspects of school not just to what students are going to do, but to who they are going to

become and how they make sense out of life. This shift holds tremendous promise for students, teachers, principals, and society.

I will conclude with a story. Principal Michael Barakat at Bronx High School for Law and Community Service, shared with me the inspiration that was carrying him in his role as principal. He had originally been handed the leadership of his school when it was labeled a “low performing school” by the department of education and had been charged with turning it around. Overwhelmed by the challenge after some time, he came to a point where he was ready to call it quits. He had previously arranged a meeting with Principal Ed Tom, who founded a public high school, the Bronx Center for Science and Mathematics.

Principal Tom was the first principal to adopt the QUESTion Project. His school had become one of the highest-performing public high schools in the country. He was a “master principal” and a mentor to many others. After seeing the impact of our program in a 45-minute session with students, he had told us, “I’ve succeeded in preparing students for college and career, but I have not succeeded in preparing them for life.” Thus, it was with his school—teachers, staff, and students, that we launched and co-created the QUESTion Class.

Principal Barakat had arranged this meeting with Principal Tom to find out what he was doing that made his school so successful. On the day of the meeting, Principal Barakat asked himself why he should attend this meeting and feel even worse about how he was doing, but he decided to go anyway.

As Principal Tom was showing him around the school and sharing the incredible fruits of his and his team’s work, he noticed that Principal Barakat was struggling. Principal Tom turned to him, looked straight into his eyes and said, “Wanna come to my office and grab a cup of coffee?” Once they were in the privacy of the office, Principal Tom told him, “I’m going to go out on a limb and tell you how I make all this happen; I pray a lot.”

Principal Barakat described this as a pivotal moment in his life, and a turning point for his entire school (which is now thriving). He realized that he had been keeping an artificial barrier between who he is deep down, and his students and his school. Removing that artificial barrier to his inner life, connected him with his humanity, his inspiration, and his love for the students. This sparked a passion and creativity through which he drastically turned things around. Speak with him about his school today, and you’ll experience the rare leadership he holds—the kind that is unique to educators who boldly own their humanity as inseparable from that of the students.

I share this not to advocate for religion or spirituality, but to convey the power of an approach that is grounded in our care for students. We all need permission to “love.” As educators, having real and concrete ways to create space to engage students with the deeper layers of what makes them human can give us that permission to go beyond techniques and ideas about what’s best for students, and be with them on the human journey we all share. And by applying rigor to our approach, we can avoid the pitfalls of imposing a dogma, however positive it might

be, or reducing students' inner worlds to a set of skills. We can make room for the depth and mystery of who they are and what life is about and can be about.

I would like to thank all the teachers and principals who have been champions for students, who are leading the way on this path with their care and vulnerability as strengths, who have contributed so much to these ideas, and who give us confidence to express this possibility through their example of engaging their own and their students' humanity, demonstrating its value for others.

To create the social foundations for a thriving society, and for we as citizens to be able to have constructive dialogue and recognize our shared human journey and responsibility to create the future together, I don't see a more worthy experiment right now than this shift in perspective, where we see each student's humanity—the core of the “whole child”—at the center of the educational process.

* * *

About Gerard Senehi

Gerard is inspired by the potential in education to engage the best in students as a foundation for them to thrive and to advance society. After graduating from Amherst College, he taught science and art, viewing science as a way to “teach” curiosity and art as a way to spark creativity. With a firm belief that education could do more to better prepare students for life and support the development of their humanity, he went on to complete a master’s degree in education at the University of Massachusetts. Feeling that something was missing in education, he went on a quest to find answers to big life questions. While on this path, Gerard also developed a career as an entertainer doing mystery shows, quickly reaching the top of his field and earning the admiration of world leaders, celebrities, Fortune 500 CEOs, and national and international media. Through his performances, he incorporates his passion for mystery and inspires his audiences to ask big questions about life and reality. Simultaneously, he continued to pursue his vision for expanding the role of education, and in 2014 he founded the nonprofit Open Future Institute’s QUESTion Project with his wife, Francesca Rusciani. They worked closely with educators and students to co-create the QUESTion Class, a semester-long daily class for high school students. The class supports students in engaging meaningfully with some of the most important questions about life—questions that are at the foundation of understanding who we are and building a life of purpose.

About the QUESTion Project from Open Future Institute (<https://openfutureinstitute.org/>)

An SEL Program that Addresses Today’s Challenges

- **Empowers the Whole Child** by connecting students with who they are, their potential to author their own lives and pursue a life of meaning, purpose, and infinite possibilities
- **Supports Mental Health and Social-Emotional Wellbeing** by creating a foundation of self-knowledge and authentic identity that provides an anchor of strength in the face of challenges
- **Addresses Economic Inequality and Racial Injustice at its Core** by empowering youth in underserved communities to shape what they will do and who they will become, and by tackling together some of the most important issues and questions they face, together, to create a healthy, just and thriving society

An Approach that Reimagines Education, Co-Created with Students and Educators

We partner with high school leaders, and teachers who share our passion to expand and reimagine the role of education.

There are three core components to our program:

- A semester/year-long **Curriculum** with a holistic SEL framework that addresses foundational questions about life, designed with the input of hundreds of students and implemented as a credit bearing Elective, Advisory or part of a Health Class
- A **Teacher Training & Professional Development Program** that empowers faculty, staff, and school leadership to support student growth and adopt a shared language and approach throughout the school
- A **Student Leadership Program** that addresses the human foundations of leadership, and enables students to become leaders and mentors in their schools and communities

A vision for the Future

Our vision extends far beyond the success of our program. We envision a future where all students have age-appropriate support for their humanity at every stage of their educational journey, curated thoughtfully through different programs and approaches.