

# The QUESTION CLASS

## A PROJECT OF OPEN FUTURE INSTITUTE

### A Qualitative Impact Study

Heather Malin  
Stanford University

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#### ABSTRACT

This qualitative interview study investigated the impact of the QUESTion Class, a social emotional learning (SEL) program that aims to support high school students to develop authentic identities, purpose, and agency using a whole-child approach. We conducted interviews with 18 alumni of the QUESTion Class from Title 1 high schools in New York City, as well as seven teachers and three school administrators from schools that provide the QUESTion Class and analyzed the interviews using inductive thematic analysis. Two key themes were identified in alumni interviews: (1) Alumni said the class helped them to be more aware of their identity and open to purposeful possibilities for their future lives, and (2) Alumni said the class helped them learn to be more open to and accepting of the perspectives of others, and better able to connect with others despite their differences. Teachers and school leaders described benefits of the class for students, teachers, and their schools, and discussed challenges with implementing the class and adaptations they made in teaching the class. The implications for individual student development, school programming, and society are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

## THE NEED FOR PURPOSE DEVELOPMENT IN HIGH SCHOOLS

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

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

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

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

## THE QUESTION PROJECT

The QUESTion Project provides teachers with strategies—through a curriculum guide, training workshops, and coaching—for helping students explore and develop three aspects of self that could support these outcomes:

- **Identity.** Teachers are provided activities to engage students in developing a strong sense of *identity*, meaning greater self-awareness, deeper understanding of self in relation to others, and stronger sense of one’s humanity.
- **Agency.** Teachers are provided tools to support students in developing *agency*, meaning the courage and power to define a life path for oneself and to pursue it.
- **Purpose.** Teachers are provided skills and activities to support students in exploring and developing *purpose*, meaning the drive to live a meaningful life by making a positive contribution in the world beyond the self.

The identity-agency-purpose framework of the QUESTion Project provides students with personal resources for living a life of purpose. Purpose is defined as “intention to accomplish something both personally meaningful and of consequence in the world beyond the self,” (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). This definition suggests that people living with purpose are aware of what they find personally meaningful (strong identity awareness) and feel empowered to act on needs in the world that they can address through their unique strengths and interests (strong sense of agency). Thus, in theory, young people can develop a sense of purpose by gaining better understanding of who they are and what matters to them, and by gaining a broader perspective on the world around them and the role they play in the world.

Developed by the Open Future Institute (OFI), the QUESTion Class has been offered in public high schools since 2015. The founders consulted with researchers and educators and worked with over 100 high school and college students to develop, pilot, and iterate a program that would engage students in discussing and reflecting on fundamental questions about life, and that would support students as they navigate the choices and challenges they face as they develop a life of purpose. The QUESTion Project is currently provided to students at Title 1 public high schools in New York City and Los Angeles. Schools can choose to offer the QUESTion Class as a required elective, as part of a health class, or as an advisory program at any high school grade level, and as a semester or yearlong course. Schools can provide the class for students two, three, or five days per week. This paper reports on a qualitative impact study that was conducted with alumni who participated in the class at their South Bronx high schools in the first years it was offered.

The QUESTion curriculum consists of up to 90 lesson plans grouped into five units, or “pillars” organized to support development of identity, agency, and purpose: Choice, Purpose, Fearlessness, Interconnectedness, and Bigger Picture. Each unit includes detailed lesson plans with hands-on activities, resources (such as videos), writing prompts, and discussion questions that teachers can use to elicit open and deep dialogue about the pillar. For example, in the pillar of Choice, one lesson engages students in creating a diagram of their “river of life” to reflect on turning point events in their lives and reflect on their own sense of agency. After students complete their river diagrams, the teacher initiates a discussion by asking, “So life can be something that happens to us and something that we can create. What helps us create our lives and shape our own rivers?” (Open Future Institute, 2018). In a later lesson, students are asked to consider how their choices impact themselves and the world by discussing questions such as, “Can a choice that is neutral to one person be consequential to another?” The questions in the curriculum do not have right or wrong answers and are intended to be challenging for high school students. Teachers can tailor the language and activities in the curriculum to suite their students.

At the time this study was conducted, QUESTion Class teachers participated in an intensive 20-hour summer training academy to learn the curriculum and an instructional approach designed to engage the whole child. In the training, teachers engage in some of the activities they would be doing with students and explore some of the fundamental life questions they would be asking students to discuss in the class. Throughout the school year, teachers receive ongoing one-to-one coaching with QUESTion Project trainer as they implement the class, as well as professional development workshops with other QUESTion Class teachers throughout the year. Schools that offer the QUESTion Class receive a whole-school QUESTion Day experience, with an assembly, activities, and class discussions to spark students’ and teachers’ curiosity about life questions and glimpse the potential for engaging with those questions at school. Finally, upon completing the QUESTion Class, students can enroll in a QUESTion Leadership Program, through which they can share their experiences in the QUESTion Class with other youth and further develop leadership skills by leading youth groups, co-facilitating the QUESTion Class in their school with younger students, writing blog posts for publication, and creating podcasts (<https://openfutureinstitute.org>).

## STUDY DESIGN

To investigate the intended and unintended impacts of the QUESTion Class, we designed a qualitative study using interviews with QUESTion Class alumni, teachers, and principals. The following research questions guided our data collection and analysis: How do alumni describe their experience with the QUESTion Class? What do students take from the class that they continue to use after high school? How has the class informed alumni thinking about purpose, their future, and their relationships with others? What effects do teachers experience from their involvement with QUESTion Project?

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## METHOD

### **Participants**

We invited 18 alumni of the QUESTion Class to participate in interviews. The alumni interviewees were students in the QUESTion class at one of two high schools in New York City in 2015 and 2016. Interviewees were ethnically diverse, describing themselves as Black-Puerto Rican, Hispanic-Dominican, Afro-Latino, Hispanic, African American, Black, Asian American, and Bengali. Ten interviewees were female, and the mean age of the interviewees was 20 years. Additionally, seven teachers, two principals, and one assistant principal from schools that provide the QUESTion Class participated in interviews.

### **Interview Questions**

The alumni interview included two sections. The first section was based on the Youth Purpose Interview (Andrews et al., 2006) and asked alumni to discuss the things that matter most to them, their activities, and their goals for the future. The second section of the interview asked alumni to discuss their experiences with the QUESTion Class, framed by the five pillars—choice, purpose, fearlessness, interconnectedness, and bigger picture. Alumni were asked to discuss their understanding of each pillar topic and how the QUESTion Class informed or influenced their understanding of each topic.

Teachers and principals were asked to discuss their goals for students in providing the QUESTion Class, benefits they saw students experience from the class, their own experiences and what they learned from implementing the class, how the class might have influenced or

impacted their teaching in other classes, ways they adapted the curriculum, and challenges they faced in implementing the class.

### **Coding and Analysis**

Although the alumni interview was structured by the five pillars of the QUESTION Project, we maintained an open and inductive analysis approach so we could see how the pillars intersected with each other in the interviewees' understanding and infused different aspects of their lives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As we developed codes, we noted words that came up in many interviews, such as "shy," "open," "vulnerable," "perspective," and "humanity." These recurring words helped shape the analysis according to the interviewees' language, capturing how they made sense of the pillars and what they retained from class.

After familiarizing ourselves with the data and discussing the recurring language and themes in the interviews, we developed a set of codes and organized the codes into themes that made sense of alumni's experiences with the class, as seen in Table 1. In the final analysis, the coded interviews were interpreted to draw out deeper meaning about the impact of the class for alumni and organized into the thematic results described below (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019).

Teacher and principal interviews were thematically coded for student goals and learning, teacher experience, challenges in implementing the class, and teacher adaptations to the class.

## RESULTS

### TEACHER AND PRINCIPAL INTERVIEWS

We interviewed seven QUESTion Class teachers and three school leaders to learn about their experiences with the QUESTion program. Teachers shared insights about how teaching the class impacted their teaching and influenced their personal development. School leaders and teachers discussed changes they saw in students and in their schools as a result of the class and shared ideas for improving the class and adapting the class for different circumstances. We identified the following themes as most prevalent in the interviews.

#### **Teachers and School Leaders described many benefits of the QUESTion Class for students.**

- Students listen to each other tell their stories in the class, and they are heard.
- Students have deep and meaningful conversations with their peers. The questions push students out of their comfort zone, while the lessons provide structure for conversations that would otherwise be difficult for students to start and maintain.
- Students get to hear positive things their peers think about them, which they don't normally share with each other.
- Students increase self-understanding and gain maturity in asking questions about their life path. They connect what they are doing now with where they want to go in the future. They learn to align their life choices to what they care about most.
- Students gain an empowered sense of self. They learn to see themselves as capable of overcoming fears and obstacles in pursuing their goals and in taking advantage of opportunities to go after what they want.
- Students see that we are all connected, that they do not live in isolation, and recognize that their decisions affect others.
- Students gain insights and skills that improve their school experience and performance, such as comfort with making mistakes and speaking up in class. Students appear to feel peace when they walk into the class and feel recharged when they walk out.



**Teachers got to see students' strengths that were not often revealed in traditional classes.**

- The class gave students opportunities to demonstrate—and teachers to observe—leadership abilities, public speaking skills, goal-oriented thinking, thinking about the world beyond school, wisdom, depth of ideas and questions, and kindness.

**Teachers own personal development was enhanced by teaching the class.**

- By discussing the pillars, teachers reflected on their own purpose and life path. One said the class helped her reconnect with her purpose as an educator, and another found herself looking ahead on her life path and envisioning how her purpose might change.
- Teachers improved their teaching by learning about themselves through class discussions.

**Teachers felt more connected with students who were in their QUESTion Class.**

- Some teachers said they were more authentic and open with students in the QUESTion Class, in a way that allowed them to connect with those students more than they could in a traditional academic class. The stronger connection led teachers to feel more compassion for students and to check in with students outside of class.
- Some teachers said the class helped them feel more connected to students in their other classes; as one said, it led her to slow down her interactions with all her students to get to know them better.

**Teachers and principals emphasized the value of the QUESTion Class being student-centered and at times student led.**

- Unlike in traditional content-driven classes, students in the QUESTion Class have substantial input into the topics discussed and can influence the direction the class takes.
- Teachers said they sometimes invited a student to lead a class session if the student had a lot to offer on a particular topic.
- Because there is no required academic content in the class, the direction and intensity of discussions depend on students' intrinsic motivation.

**Principals saw the QUESTion Class contributing to a more positive school culture.**

- Infusing the school with a shared language around identity, choice, and purpose improved relationships between students and teachers.
- Shared vulnerability in QUESTion Class discussions improved student-teacher relationships, which spilled over into other classes.
- The class brought out students' energy and engagement at school.
- The class influenced a more holistic educational approach in the school that was not overly focused on state tests, SATs, and college admissions.

### **Principals appreciated that the QUESTion Class is different from other SEL programs.**

- Principals appreciated the challenging and meaningful life questions the QUESTion Class asks students to discuss and said other SEL programs are too simplistic and not engaging for high school students.
- One described the QUESTion Class as more proactive than other SEL programs, which are often designed to help students and teachers react to conflict.
- One said it is unusual to find discussions of purpose in schools because it implies discussion of religion, beliefs, and world views that some schools want to avoid.

### **Teachers adapted the curriculum.**

- Some teachers adapted the language or pacing of the lessons to meet the needs of diverse learners, simplify the concepts and make them less abstract, or use language that is current to their students' way of talking.
- Some teachers preferred to use their own instructional style to facilitate classroom management rather than the approach implied by the curriculum.
- Most teachers invited students to create and teach lessons, to encourage student engagement and provide students opportunities to demonstrate leadership skills.

### **Principals and teachers experienced some challenges in implementing the QUESTion Class.**

- Principals expressed the need to find the right teacher, because the distinctive approach of the class and detailed nature of the curriculum are challenging for some teachers to learn.
- Principals were challenged to find time in the school program for the class when the school has many other priorities and requirements to juggle.
- One principal suggested that the teacher training was longer than necessary and could focus on having teachers practice implementing the lessons.
- Teachers suggested that the curriculum is challenging to use with diverse students, especially English language learners, students with special needs, and especially quiet students. Some struggled to integrate these students into the class and wondered if the curriculum could be better fitted to the needs of diverse learners.

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## ALUMNI INTERVIEWS

In the QUESTion Class, alumni had opportunities to look deeply inward and at the world around them. Their increased capacity for inward and outward self-reflection led to two substantial themes that we identified in the interviews. First, alumni gained a greater sense of openness, possibility, and autonomy in planning for the future. Second, they became more open to and understanding of the diverse perspectives of others and more able to connect with others.

### **Self-Reflection**

Alumni described the QUESTion Class as a place to practice deep self-reflection through discussion of meaningful life questions. This deep self-reflection enabled them to look ahead with more clarity about their direction and confidence that they could pursue a meaningful life path. As described by one alumna, "It has you thinking about your life, it has you thinking about your future. And I feel like it's a good program for kids because it makes them look within themselves on where they want to go." She noticed that the self-reflection she did in the QUESTion Class gave her more self-knowledge than other students in her college:

*"They graduated not knowing who they were, and they picked a major and they are going into a career they don't really like.... The QUESTion Project really helped me be more in touch with my identity."*

### **Becoming Open to Possibilities for My Life**

Through intensive self-reflection activities in the QUESTion Class, alumni learned to look to the future with a sense of possibility. There were four prominent facets to their newly opened perspective on possibilities for their lives:

- **Developed Courage for Self-Expression and Self-Exploration at School.**

In the class, alumni overcame their fear of being open and vulnerable in school. As they developed courage to express their authentic selves, they also gained ability to explore who they are and who they want to become. Several spoke of being "shy" in high school, described as reluctance to express themselves and discomfort with exposing their "true self" at school. In the class, they overcame shyness to examine vulnerable aspects of themselves through class discussions and used the opportunity for self-exploration and self-discovery.

*"The class taught us to be more vulnerable, to talk about things... [and] I got more of a clear view of what I wanted to do with my life."*

- **Expanded Capacity to Develop Purpose Through Ongoing Self-Discovery.**

Alumni learned to embrace purpose development as an ongoing process of self-discovery. Many started the class with limited understanding of purpose or believing purpose is something you must be born with. In the QUESTion Class, alumni learned to see purpose as ongoing self-exploration rather than something you have or do not have. They described purpose exploration as both enjoyable and challenging, and as a skill they would carry with them to use throughout their lives.

*"The QUESTion Class will set you on the path to finding your purpose, but it won't hold your hand the whole way there. That's only up to you to discover what you are destined to do in your life."*

- **Discovered Ability to Pursue Beyond-the-Self Purpose.**

Because the class integrated purpose with the pillars of interconnectedness and bigger picture, many alumni came to think of purpose in terms of how they could make a positive contribution in the world. As one alum said, the class "helped me understand that...there are bigger things I want to do in life, like influence others, help others through my writing.... I don't only want to...have a job and that's it, that's my entire life." Several alumni discovered a passion for social justice and felt empowered by the class to act on their concerns.

*"It made me realize that I have...the ability to...make the change that I want to make in society."*

- **Gained Autonomy Over Life Choices.**

In the QUESTion Class, alumni learned they have control in making important life choices. Some felt their life choices were limited by where they lived and some noticed people in their lives making bad choices. In the class, however, they found a space where they could discuss life choices in terms of possibility, autonomy, and responsibility. They learned to see their life choices as unlimited— "there are infinite ideas in the universe, infinite things you could do" —but also learned that navigating unlimited choices requires being thoughtful, observant, and analytical, and taking responsibility for the choices they make.

*"My home environment ...wasn't the best. I didn't see people making many good choices....Taking this class and talking about choices and possibilities really helped me develop a positive outlook.... It brought me hope."*

*"The purpose pillar has helped me at times where I ... didn't know what to do. I wasn't questioning myself; I was just going by the book and what the steps are in normal society. Now, I take into consideration what I should do on my own terms, and where I want to go on my own path."*

### **Openness to Others and a Shared Humanity**

The QUESTion Class supported alumni to be more open with others, recognize that people have different perspectives, and make more meaningful connections with others. Four subthemes took shape as alumni described important ways the class impacted their capacity to be open to new perspectives and connect with others:

- **Gained Greater Capacity to Connect with Others and Build Trusting Relationships.**

Alumni said their classmates and teachers were vulnerable and trusting in the class, enabling them to connect with each other despite differences that previously distanced them. Because they were gaining self-awareness while also learning about meaningful aspects of their classmates, alumni discovered commonalities and shared experiences that provided meaningful bonding opportunities in the class. Alumni continued to use the skills they learned in the class to establish open and trusting relationships.

*"The class gives you a sense of connectedness with a person.... You're sharing vulnerable thoughts that you typically wouldn't share on a day-to-day basis."*

- **Learned to Look Beyond Assumptions About Others.**

Because they shared meaningful and previously undisclosed aspects of themselves, alumni recognized their tendency to view others from a narrow perspective. The class taught them to look beyond their assumptions and view others with greater compassion, and by doing so, they found they could bring out the best in others and have more positive relationships.

*"The class showed me that people are multifaceted.... We don't know everybody's all their ways. But when [we] talk about things that we love and care about, people can express themselves in the best ways."*

- **Gained Ability to Recognize and Connect with the Humanity of Others.**

Alumni attained a sense of shared humanity in the QUESTion Class as they expressed themselves authentically and without fear of judgment. They learned that their classmates, teachers, and other people in their lives can make mistakes, go through difficult times, and struggle with life challenges, and they learned to be patient with others and respect their humanity. Hearing about the human struggles of others gave alumni a deeper sense of connection and helped them feel less isolated in their own struggles. It also helped alumni understand that they can love a person and respect their humanity, even when they do not like or agree with the person.

*"I realized that I might not like ... my classmate ..., but I still love my classmate because I feel like we're connected."*

- **Developed Enduring Capacity to Have Deeper Relationships with Others.**

Alumni said the QUESTion Class has enduring effects on how they relate to others, which they found helpful during the Covid-19 pandemic, in their transition to college, and in preparing for a desired career. They emphasized the ongoing relevance of capacities such as being vulnerable with others, engaging others in meaningful discussions, open perspective-taking, and respectful listening. The relational experience they gained in the class instilled respect for others' humanity that empowers them to forge strong social connections, be leaders in their communities, and advocate for others.

*"[In the QUESTion Class] we were open to figuring out our connection with each other, our humanity.... We were given space to talk about our daily struggles as minorities, as women.... I remember we had so many deep conversations. You need that space, besides school, besides regular subjects. You need a space to talk to people. That's how students are going to develop as members of society. Well-adjusted members of society – when you're able to connect with people."*

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## INDIVIDUAL, SCHOOL, AND SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS

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

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

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

**Purpose as an Individual and a Social Good.** QUESTion Class alumni learned to see purpose as a lifelong process of exploration and discovery, and many learned to think of purpose as a way to contribute to the world beyond themselves. Individuals benefit from gaining this perspective on purpose because it endows them with personal agency in creating a life of purpose. By developing their capacity for purpose, QUESTion alumni also increased their potential benefit to society. This effect has been measured in a couple of studies; for example, one study found that purpose mitigated the effect of growing up in poverty on adolescents' antisocial behaviors, and

another found that purposeful adolescents often responded to adversity by using their personal strengths to have a positive impact on others (Machell, Disabato, & Kashdan, 2016; Malin, Morton, Nadal, & Smith, 2019). Aside from the empirical evidence that individual purpose benefits society, the theoretical implications are clear. Society benefits when individuals pursue a life of beyond-the-self purpose. Communities benefit from the prosocial activities of their members, and from being made up of individuals who are living lives of purpose.

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

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## LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

A qualitative impact study of a school program has value because we can learn how stakeholders experience the program and how it impacts them from their perspective. This approach has advantages over other evaluation methods because it reveals the meaning of the program for participants and how they make sense of and use what they learned. However, there are limitations to this approach because it does not provide an objective measure of learning outcomes. Also, the small and non-random sample needs to be accounted for when considering the results. Therefore, this study should not be taken to represent outcomes expected for all students, but as a description of what is possible when schools implement the QUESTion Class. Further evaluation research is needed to understand the average outcomes.

Alumni demonstrated that the QUESTion Class effectively nurtured their sense of purpose and their connection to others. They learned to see purpose as an ongoing pursuit and thus something that can be a driving force now and throughout their lives. They gained a capacity for human connection that they did not have prior to taking the class and could articulate the specific ways the class helped them develop more meaningful relationships with others. This learning did not happen at the expense of academic preparation for college and career. On the contrary, alumni were thriving in college, graduate school, and alternative career paths, even during a pandemic that upended their lives. By discussing purpose in school, they were better prepared to use their academic learning to create lives of purpose after graduation. The QUESTion Project therefore provides a model for SEL that meets the unique needs of adolescent students and that can support their wellbeing while also preparing them for a successful future.



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TABLE 1

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

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