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The Ecology of Purposeful Living Across the Lifespan

Developmental, Educational, and Social Perspectives

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Chapter 13
Youth Purpose: A Translational Research Agenda

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Abstract Psychological research on purpose conducted in the past 15–20 years has considerably advanced our understanding of the construct. However, there are at least two questions that have not been as adequately explored: *How can we foster purpose in the lives of young people*, and *what does purpose look like among diverse groups of youth?* This chapter reviews a series of studies that have sought to explore these questions. For instance, we include a discussion of two empirically-tested interventions that help young people search for and identify their purpose in life. Design logic and lessons gleaned from these studies are addressed. In addition, the chapter outlines studies of purpose with young people from low-socioeconomic areas in the United States, with street children living in Liberia, and with European college students living amidst a serious economic downturn. Findings and implications from this line of research are also discussed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of topics future researchers of youth purpose should explore.

Keywords Purpose in life · Positive youth development · Positive psychological interventions · Adolescents

Since roughly 2000, when psychological research on purpose got underway in earnest, research has significantly advanced our understanding of this important construct. Research has explored varied conceptions of purpose, positive correlates of a life lived with purpose, and even the developmental trajectory of the construct (see Bronk, 2013 for a review of research on these topics and others). However, research has yet to address at least two important dimensions of purpose. *How can we foster purpose in the lives of young people*, and *what does purpose look like among diverse groups of youth?* This chapter reviews a series of studies, conducted at the Claremont Graduate University's Adolescent Moral Development lab at Claremont Graduate University (CGU; http://www.amdcgu.com), that explore these questions.

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Before diving into the particulars of this research, however, it is helpful to introduce our conception of purpose.

13.1 Purpose Defined

The working definition that has guided our work and other's work suggests purpose refers to a long-term, forward-looking intention to accomplish aims that are both meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). This definition features three primary dimensions. First, a purpose in life is an intention. It is a far-horizon goal of sorts that provides direction to future plans. In this way, purpose is forward-looking. Second, a purpose in life is personally meaningful. Individuals' most significant values and beliefs generally serve as the foundation of their purpose in life. Consequently, individuals eagerly invest time, energy, and other resources toward its pursuit. In other words, individuals do not merely dream about their purposes; they act on them. Third, in addition to being important to the individual, purpose is also of consequence to the world beyond the individual. It is directed toward the broader world. This part of the definition distinguishes our conception of purpose from some other conceptions of the construct. Whereas most conceptions of purpose incorporate the first two criteria (a far-horizon, goal-directed aim that is personally meaningful), not all include the third criteria (*inspired by a desire to make a difference in the broader world*). The beyond-the-self dimension, however, is a critical part of the construct. Research finds it is responsible for many of the positive experiences and outcomes associated with the construct (Damon, 2008). For instance, compared to others, individuals who demonstrate this beyond-the-self dimension are more likely to possess well-integrated personality dispositions (Mariano & Valliant, 2012) and more likely to report that their lives are satisfying (Bronk & Finch, 2010).

Based on this conception of purpose, the construct is relevant to individuals from adolescence onward. Not until roughly the second decade of life do most young people, at least in Western cultures, develop the cognitive abilities that enable the hypothetical-deductive reasoning and abstract thought required to support the search for purpose (Damon, 2008; Piaget, 1964). Consequently, although children are likely to engage in meaningful activities, they are unlikely to develop an enduring purpose in life (Bronk, 2012).

Not only are adolescents cognitively equipped to lead lives of purpose, but they are also often eager to do so. Early purpose formation coincides with identity development, which is the key developmental milestone of the adolescent and young adult years (Damon, 2008; Erikson, 1968, 1980), and research finds that purpose formation and identity development—at least for some young people—are intertwined and mutually-reinforcing processes, whereby growth in one encourages growth in the other (Bronk, 2011; Burrow & Hill, 2011; Hill & Burrow, 2012). Perhaps because of adolescents' developmental preparedness for purpose, at least some studies find (e.g. Bronk et al., 2009) they report that identifying their purpose is a satisfying

experience. Given that committing to a purpose in life is consistently associated with reports of satisfaction, it makes sense to begin cultivating purpose as early in the lifespan as possible. In short, although individuals can—and do– discover and lead lives of purpose into adulthood, adolescence marks a stage ripe for purpose formation. For this reason, much of our work has focused on purpose among youth.

Our work on youth purpose has a strong applied focus. Rather than merely describing and understanding how purposes form, we also seek to encourage their development. Accordingly, in addition to sharing our findings in academic books and peer-reviewed journals, we also share our findings in blogs, television news programs, and newspaper articles. Translating our scientific understanding into practical information people can use to help youth discover and lead lives of purpose is core to what we do.

13.2 Cultivating Purpose

The applied nature of our work is evident in the two questions that have guided our work over the past few years. The first is, *how can we intentionally cultivate purpose among youth?* A large and growing body of research points to the many benefits of leading a life of purpose. For instance, studies find that purpose is associated with a wide range of physical health benefits, including better sleep, less chronic pain, and even longevity (Hill & Turiano, 2014; Kass et al., 1991; Krause, 2009; Ryff, Singer, & Love, 2004; Turner, Smith, & Ong, 2017). Research similarly finds that purpose is associated with a variety of psychological indicators of health, including hope, happiness, and life satisfaction (Bronk et al., 2009; French & Joseph, 1999; Gillham et al., 2011). Although much of this work is correlational in nature, emerging research suggests the relationship may be causal, whereby leading a life of purpose contributes to better physical health. More specifically, recent empirical studies have concluded that leading a life of purpose changes individuals' genomic make-up in a health-sustaining way (Fredrickson et al., 2015). The different ways we experience life influences our genetic expression, and leading a life of purpose elicits a favorable profile of gene expression in immune cells (Kitayama, Akutsu, Uchida, & Cole, 2016). In other words, beyond merely coexisting with healthy outcomes, recent research suggests the presence of purpose helps support them.

Despite the benefits associated with leading a life of purpose, the experience is relatively rare. Although more research is this area is warranted, existing research suggests only about 1 in 10 early adolescents, 1 in 5 late adolescents, and 1 in 3 college-aged youth report having a clear purpose in their lives (Damon, 2008). Because purpose appears to develop alongside identity and because identity development begins in adolescence (Bronk, 2011; Damon, 2008; Erikson, 1968, 1980; Sumner, Burrow, & Hill, 2015), it may be the case that rates of purpose increase further into adulthood as by then, more people have developed a stable sense of identity. In addition, these relatively low rates of purpose may be a function of the

way we conceptualize purposes. As noted above, our conception of purpose is more stringent than some others (e.g. Ryff & Singer, 1998).

Purpose toolkit. Taking these two findings together—that leading a life of purpose contributes to beneficial outcomes and that it is a relatively rare experience for youth—led us to investigate ways of intentionally cultivating purpose. Our approach to this effort was shaped, in large part, by happenstance. Early longitudinal research into purpose, of which the first author was a part, explored the nature and prevalence of purpose among North American youth. As part of this work, researchers gathered Time 1 surveys from youth across the United States and Canada (Bundick, 2011). Months later, a subset of these individuals was randomly selected to participate in interviews about the nature of their purpose in life. Interviewers were surprised by youths' eagerness to talk about issues related to purpose. Several of the interviewees asked to have the recordings sent to them; others requested the transcripts. Members of the research team began to wonder if the one-time, 45-minute interview probing purpose might have served as an informal intervention of sorts. With that in mind, following the Time 2 survey collection effort, which took place months after the interview, interviewees' scores were compared with the non-interviewees' scores, and youth who had been interviewed exhibited significantly higher purpose scores!

Although it was promising to learn that the interview was an effective, albeit unintentional, purpose-fostering tool, there were clearly problems with using this approach to help large numbers of youth discover meaningful purposes for their lives. Interviewing youth is a time-consuming and unwieldy effort. It requires trained interviewers, parental permission, and face-to-face encounters. Consequently, although conducting interviews may be a useful approach to helping small numbers of youth discover their purpose, it would not be a feasible approach to cultivating purpose among larger numbers of young people.

To expand our impact, we decided to explore online purpose-fostering options (Bronk et al., 2019). Our aim was to translate the interview protocol into a set of online activities young people could complete to relatively quickly and easily explore and ultimately discover their purpose in life. We created two online toolkits, which we tested against a third Control Toolkit. Each of the three toolkits invited youth to log-on to a website once a day for three days over the course of a week to complete between 15 and 20 min of online activities each time. Before, immediately after, and a week after completing the online activities, youth completed surveys designed to assess the extent to which they were actively searching for a purpose and the extent to which they had identified a purpose for their lives. Change-sensitive measures, including the Search for Purpose Inventory (Dubon, Riches, Benavides, & Bronk, in preparation) and the Claremont Purpose Scale (Bronk, Riches, & Mangan, 2018), were created to assess changes in the search for purpose and identified purpose levels, respectively. In addition, youth in each of the three conditions completed measures of gratitude, hope, and prosocial intentions.

The Purpose Toolkit featured activities that sought to cultivate each component of the construct. Accordingly, activities were designed to help youth (1) reflect on the long-term aims that mattered most to them, (2) contemplate their personally significant values and beliefs, (3) and consider how they could use their talents to

contribute to the world beyond themselves. Following the logic of the interview, participants logged into the website and completed a set of online activities that encouraged them to consider the broader world and their role in it (Reilly & Damon, 2013). In one such activity, they were presented with a quotation about the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose and asked to reflect on and write about what they would change about the world, if they could change anything they wanted. In another activity, youth completed a Q-sort, in which they identified the values (e.g., caring for my family, contributing to my community, living my life in accordance with my religious beliefs, creating something new, preserving the environment) that were most important to them. Following this, they wrote about why each of their top 3 values was so important to them and how each shaped their future plans. Yet another activity presented youth with a brief clip of comedian Jimmy Fallon talking about his purpose in life. Afterward, they were asked to write about the way they hoped to leave their mark on the world. Youth who had trouble identifying ways of contributing were encouraged to send emails to 5 adults who knew them well, including to family friends, employers, coaches, mentors, teachers, etc. Emails asked the adults to answer 3 questions about the youth: *What do you think I really enjoy doing? What do you think I'm particularly good at? How do you think I'll leave my mark?* Responses helped youth identify possible purposes.

Gratitude toolkit. Rather than fostering purpose directly, the second toolkit, the Gratitude Toolkit, sought to cultivate purpose indirectly, via gratitude. Theoretical research suggests youth focused on the blessings in their lives are inclined to consider ways of giving back (Damon, 2008). Other scholars have similarly argued that the recognition that other people have helped them triggers an urge to repay either the benefactor or others, to alleviate the uncomfortable sense of indebtedness (Trivers, 1971). The prosocial behavior that results from a grateful state is referred to as upstream reciprocity, which includes direct upstream reciprocity (where individuals pay back the person who helped them) and indirect upstream reciprocity (where individuals pay the favor forward to another individual or group; Nowak & Roch, 2007). Whether helping those who helped them or helping others, grateful individuals are more likely than their peers to contribute to the world beyond themselves (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002), and the relationship between gratitude and contribution appears to be a causal one where gratitude leads to prosocial action (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010; Tsang, 2007). We were curious to see if the self-transcendent action inspired by grateful thinking might manifest as purpose.

To empirically test this possibility, activities in the Gratitude Toolkit were designed to cultivate a grateful mindset. In one activity, youth completed an abridged version of the Three Good Things exercise (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005), during which they were asked to list 3 things they were grateful for each day. In another activity, youth were introduced to the concept of benefit appraisals, which encouraged them to recognize that with each act of gratitude: (1) the recipient receives some benefit, (2) the helper incurs some cost (e.g., time, energy, other personal resources), and (3) the intention behind the act is geared toward assisting the recipient. Empirical research finds that reminding individuals of this appraisal process enhances feelings

of gratitude (Froh et al., 2014). Another activity asked youth to take a "Gratitude Walk," during which they were instructed to reflect on the blessings in their lives for at least 5 min. Yet another activity featured a brief video clip that introduced the benefits of practicing (Seligman et al., 2005) and expressing gratitude (Toepfer & Walker, 2009). After this, participants were asked to write a letter of gratitude to someone who had helped them.

In addition to designing the Purpose and Gratitude Toolkits, we also created a Control Toolkit, which consisted of activities designed to enhance memory strategies. One activity presented a brief video clip that taught youth how to make up stories that would help them remember lists of items. Another activity encouraged youth to practice "location memory" and another instructed youth in how to use the MAPS (Music, Association, Picturing, Stories) strategy for remembering discrete pieces of information.

Participants included 224 youth who were randomly assigned to complete one of the three toolkits during a one-week period ($n = 79$ Purpose Toolkit; $n = 73$ Gratitude Toolkit; $n = 71$ Control Toolkit). Results suggest that from pre-test to post-test, participants who completed the Purpose and Gratitude Toolkits, but not the Control Toolkit, demonstrated significant increases in their search for purpose and in the extent to which they reported having identified a purpose for their lives. For individuals in both experimental conditions, levels of identified purpose did not change from the post- to lagged-post-test, which suggests the effects of the week-long intervention endured for at least another week. Interestingly, in addition to showing increases in both the search for purpose and identified purpose, youth in the Gratitude Toolkit condition also demonstrated significant increases in gratitude, hope, and prosocial intentions (Baumsteiger, Mangan, Bronk, & Bono, 2019). Youth in the Purpose Toolkit and Control conditions did not show these same increases, suggesting there may be some advantages to cultivating purpose indirectly via gratitude.

Interestingly, other researchers have similarly found that cultivating purpose indirectly can be effective. For instance, experiences of awe incline individuals to connect with the world beyond the self, and this can take the form of discovering a purpose for their lives (Shiota, Keltner, & Mossman, 2007). These indirect approaches to cultivating purpose may be effective because being asked directly to reflect on one's purpose can be intimidating, especially for individuals who do not yet know exactly what it is. Approaching the topic indirectly—either through reminding individuals of the blessings in their lives or by having them experience a sense of vastness—may be less threatening ways of encouraging young people to consider how they want to contribute to the broader world.

13.3 Purpose Among Diverse Groups of Youth

The research on interventions that foster purpose paints a promising picture. To help more youth discover meaningful purposes in life, we needed to understand how purpose develops among individuals from different cultures and contexts. Toward

that end, the second question our work has recently explored is, *what does purpose look like among diverse groups of young people?* Although scientific research on purpose has increased dramatically over the past 15 years (Bronk, 2013), most studies have focused on purpose among middle-class, primarily European-American youth growing up in the United States. The bidirectional interactions between person and context conceptualized by the relational developmental systems model (Lerner, 2004; Lerner et al., 2019) suggest the process of purpose development is likely to vary among youth from different socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. To gain a fuller sense of what purpose entails among diverse groups of young people, our lab conducted three additional studies.

Purpose amidst the Great Recession. Although the relational developmental systems theory predicts that both proximal and distal contexts are likely to influence purpose development (Lerner, 2004), research has most commonly focused on the role of proximal contexts (e.g., families, schools). We were eager to build on this research by examining how broader political and economic forces influenced purpose formation.

In particular, we sought to understand what effect the Great Recession had on young people's views of the future and their purposes in life (Bronk, Leontopoulou, & McConchie, 2018). Other purpose researchers have similarly been interested in understanding the effects of this dramatic economic downturn on individuals' purposes in life. A recent study concluded that although health and well-being scores were somewhat lower for a sample of US individuals post-recession than for a sample of US individuals pre-recession, rates of purpose among the two samples did not differ (Kirsch, Love, Radler, & Ryff, 2019). In other words, although the downturn appears to have been associated with lower levels of some dimensions of well-being, it was not associated with lower levels of purpose.

The Great Recession ended in the United States in 2009, but it lasted through 2016 in Greece. Young people, especially those in the second and third decades of life, are particularly likely to be negatively influenced by economic downturns, such as the Great Recession (Sherrod, 2017). Ready to enter fulltime employment, they often struggle to find work, and all too often, they end up trapped in a cycle of unemployment or underemployment.

To gain a fuller sense of how youth with purpose navigated the worldwide economic downturn known as the Great Recession, members of our lab (Bronk, Leontopolou, & McConchie, 2018) conducted a mixed methods study with late adolescents ($M_{age} = 21.5$, $SD = 1.8$). The study sought to address two related questions: (1) *compared to their peers, were youth with a well-developed sense of purpose better equipped to thrive in the midst of an economic downturn,* and (2) *if they were, how did having a purpose help them thrive?* Surveys were administered to identify youth with a strong sense of purpose and to examine how purpose was related to indicators of well-being, including optimism, resilience, and positive future expectations. Following quantitative data collection, a subset of respondents was invited to participate in interviews. Specifically, youth who scored at least one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean purpose score were invited

to participate in interviews. This extreme groups design enabled us to compare the effects of the recession on youth with and without purpose.

Quantitative findings provided evidence that youth with a clear sense of purpose were thriving despite the economic downturn. Purpose was associated with higher rates of optimism, resilience, and positive future expectations. Mediational analyses indicated resilience meditated the relationship between purpose and positive future expectations, suggesting that those with a stronger purpose maintained positive future expectations by way of their resilience in the face of adversity. Optimism was also found to partially mediate the relationship between purpose and future expectations, suggesting that a sense of optimism helped, to a degree, those with a stronger sense of purpose maintain more positive future expectations. Taken together, survey results suggested youth with purpose were weathering the economic downturn better than individuals without purpose.

Interviews shed light on why this might be the case. More specifically, qualitative findings revealed that youth with above-average purpose scores felt efficacious about their ability to navigate a successful future, despite the economic downturn. Consequently, they focused on finding jobs that enabled them to grow and served as a source of joy and meaning. Youth with below-average purpose scores, on the other hand, felt the future was futile, and consequently, they sought jobs primarily as a means of survival. Related to these different professional-orientations, high-purpose youth were reluctant to leave Greece to find work, whereas low-purpose youth reported being eager to do so. High-purpose youth managed to remain hopeful by focusing on how they could help, support, and contribute to their friends, family, communities, and country, and at times, by tuning out the negative economic news. Taken together, results suggest that a purpose in life can serve a powerfully protective role. From a practical perspective, findings suggest one way of helping youth weather economic down- turns may be to cultivate purpose. Doing so is likely to benefit not only the young people, but also the families, communities, and even countries to which these young people choose to contribute.

Purpose among Low-income Youth. In addition to wanting to learn more about the role economic forces play in purpose formation, we were also eager to understand how socioeconomic status influenced purpose. Research and theory both suggest socioeconomic status is likely to influence purpose development (Manstead, 2018; Sumner, Burrow, & Hill, 2018)—the question is how?

Positive youth development scholars argue that indicators of thriving, including purpose, should be available to all young people, including those from low-income backgrounds (Benson, 2006; Damon, 2004; Lerner, 2004). In addition, Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1959) provided a particularly compelling example of someone who discovered purpose in an extremely under-resourced setting. As a concentration camp inmate, he thought deeply about his purpose and the importance of leading lives of purpose more generally. At the same time, Maslow's (1943) classic theory of the hierarchy of needs suggests something as self-actualizing as a purpose in life should not develop until after individuals have been able to meet their basic needs. Empirical research on purpose, and the closely related meaning

construct, lends support to both of these diverging theoretical perspectives (e.g., Moran, Bundick, Malin, & Reilly, 2013; Oishi & Diener, 2014).

To gain a better sense of exactly how socioeconomic status interacts with purpose development, we conducted a mixed methods study guided by three questions (Bronk, Mitchell, Hite, Mehoke, & Cheung, in press 2020): *How prevalent is purpose among youth from low-income backgrounds? What indicators of well-being is purpose associated with among youth from low-income backgrounds? How do youth from low-income backgrounds discover meaningful purposes in life?* As a point of comparison, data collected for this study came from youth from two different high schools in southern California. One high school served primarily youth from low-income backgrounds and the other served youth from primarily middle-income backgrounds. We included a middle-income sample to enable us to determine the relative prevalence of purpose among youth in this population; we did not intend to suggest middle-income youth are a standard against which others should be compared.

Based on quantitative findings, no difference in the rate of purpose between the two samples emerged. In other words, youth from the low-income community were as likely as youth from the middle-income community to report leading lives of purpose. In addition, results suggest purpose among youth from low- and middle-income backgrounds is associated with largely the same indicators of well-being. Across both samples, purpose was positively associated with hope, life satisfaction, prosocial intentions, peer support, positive affect, self-rated health, and feelings of safety, and it was negatively related to depression and stress. No relationship was observed between purpose and sleep quality or between purpose and engagement in exercise. Taken together, these results suggest purpose acts as a protective factor across these domains, regardless of youths' socioeconomic backgrounds.

Although the quantitative results pointed to similarities in the experience of purpose, themes that emerged from the qualitative data highlighted some interesting differences. Across slightly more than half the youth in the low-income sample, a fairly consistent purpose-discovery process emerged. Perhaps not surprisingly, most youth from the low-income community talked about encountering personal hardships (e.g., financial hardships, racial and gender bias, health issues) that might have derailed their pursuit of purpose. However, in some cases, rather than thwarting purpose, these hardships instead served as catalysts for its development. This occurred when youth were able to connect their hardships in the past to opportunities for meaningful action in the future. Not all personal hardships inspired purpose. It was only when youth who experienced personal hardships *also* had access to developmental assets, most commonly familial support, like-minded peers, and religious belief systems, that purpose developed. In other words, when youth from the low-income community had access to developmental assets, they were able to connect personal hardships in the past to opportunities for meaningful action in the future, and, in so doing, they discovered purpose. We looked for evidence of this same purpose-discovery process among youth in the middle-income sample, and we only found one instance of it.

From an applied perspective, these findings provide some of the first empirical evidence for the way youth from low-income backgrounds discover purposes in life.

These findings, coupled with knowledge that purpose can serve as an important source of resiliency for youth living in poverty (Machell, Disaboto, & Kashdan, 2016), provide direction to extracurricular, in-school, and other programs that seek to foster purpose among young people. More specifically, findings suggest that rather than trying to ignore or avoid potential obstacles to purpose formation, effective purpose-fostering programs should help youth identify personally significant ways of addressing the hardships in their lives. This emergent process is supported by recent research that identifies other significant pathways, including social support, passion identification, and faith, in the development of purpose among young people living in poverty (Gutowski, White, Liang, Diamonti, & Berado, 2017; Liang et al., 2017; Moran, Bundick, Malin, & Reilly, 2013). In addition, learning that purpose is most likely to blossom in the presence not only of hardships but also of contextual nutrients further highlights the need to build developmental assets in under-served communities.

Purpose and PYD among Liberian street-children. The previous study shed light on what purpose development among youth growing up in low-resourced communities in the United States entails. We wondered if poverty would have the same effects on purpose development among youth from other countries. Recently, there has been a push for internationalizing investigations of positive youth development by studying youth from the majority world—or the roughly 80% of the world's population that lives on less than $10 a day (Lerner et al., 2019; Sherrod, 2017). Research on youth in these nations is relatively sparse, yet such nations are where the majority of the world's youth live and where global populations of young people are increasing the fastest. Majority world youth face challenges not posed to youth from industrialized nations, suggesting results from studies in industrialized nations are not clearly, or even generally, applicable to youth in majority world contexts (Lerner et al., 2019).

To learn more about what purpose and other indicators of positive youth development look like among youth in the majority world, members of our lab (Bronk, Blom, & McConchie, 2019) conducted a mixed-methods study of early adolescents ($M_{age} = 10.93$, $SD = 1.35$), most of whom were living on the streets in Liberia (Blom, Bronk, Sullivan, McConchie, Ballesteros, & Farello, in press, 2020). Over the past roughly forty years, the country has suffered two catastrophic civil wars and a regional Ebola outbreak. These events decimated Liberia's critical institutions and infrastructure (Economist, 2017; UN Human Development Report, 2006; World Bank Group, 2011). Recognizing the extreme challenges confronting Liberian youth and the general breakdown of institutions that historically supported the healthy development of Liberia's young citizens (e.g., families, schools, churches), a sport for development program called L.A.C.E.S. (Life and Change Experienced Through Sport; www.laces.org) was established in the country in 2007. Sport for development programs, like L.A.C.E.S., utilize sport or physical activity to promote positive change, encourage social inclusion, and build peace among youth (Blom et al., 2015; Coalter, 2007; Lyras & Peachey, 2011). The United Nations (2014) recognizes sport for development programs as potentially effective grassroots approaches to fostering positive youth development around the globe.

All study participants were enrolled in L.A.C.E.S. Youth remain in the sport for development program for several years, and each year programming runs 3 days a week, 40 weeks a year. As such, youth have prolonged contact with the program, and the program has the opportunity to have a lasting effect on its young participants. The program has religious roots, and in addition to cultivating Christian beliefs, it focuses on cultivating purpose and other indicators of positive development.

The study was designed to answer three questions: (1) *Does participation in L.A.C.E.S. increase purpose and other indicators of positive development (e.g. social responsibility, close personal relationships, and peace) among Liberian youth living on the streets?* (2) *If so, how does L.A.C.E.S. cultivate purpose and these other important indicators of positive youth development? And,* (3) *what experiences, relationships, and conditions cultivate and stymy the growth of purpose and healthy development more generally among Liberian youth?* These questions were answered through surveys, interviews, and a photojournalistic methodology.

To answer the first question, regarding whether L.A.C.E.S. cultivated purpose and other indicators of positive youth development, participants completed surveys at the beginning and end of the program year. Results suggested that participation in the L.A.C.E.S. program did contribute to increases in purpose and other indicators of positive development (e.g. increased social responsibility, closeness to program coaches, and attenuated attitudes toward violence). To answer the second question, regarding how the program was effective, youth participated in interviews in which they reported that the program helped them discover their purpose and flourish in part by providing character building lessons. L.A.C.E.S. programming featured lessons designed to build socioemotional skills (e.g., respecting others, being honest), and, for a number of youths, this was their primary source of education in such matters. Providing positive role models—especially in the form of coaches—offering instrumental support (e.g., access to food), helping the youth get along better with their peers, and providing a foundation of a religious belief system were other ways youth reported the program helped support their healthy development.

To address the third research question, regarding the supports for the growth of purpose and positive development more generally among Liberian early adolescents, youth also participated in a photojournalistic study, in which they took pictures of the people, places, and experiences that supported and thwarted their purpose and other indicators of healthy development. Youth spent an afternoon with their L.A.C.E.S. coach taking pictures in their community. Afterward, they shared the pictures with researchers and explained how each of the subjects supported or detracted from their pursuit of purpose and healthy development. Many of the same things that supported their healthy development when present, detracted from it when they were absent. For instance, some of the most common objects in pictures were basic resources (e.g., clean drinking water, adequate food, safe places to sleep). Youth who had access to these things noted that they helped support flourishing, and youth who lacked access noted their absence detracted from flourishing. In addition, youth astutely identified access to education and supportive adults as key supports to purpose formation and healthy development.

Although this was a pilot study, we learned a good deal from the investigation. For instance, we learned that grassroots, sports programs can effectively foster purpose and other indicators of positive development in majority world contexts. We also learned that some of the same things that help youth in middle-class communities discover purpose and thrive (e.g., supportive adults) are important to the positive youth development of Liberian youth. At the same time, we learned that important differences existed, as well. For instance, although youth in middle class contexts generally take access to basic needs for granted, youth in Liberia do not. They recognize that these things, including clean drinking water, sufficient food, and a safe place to sleep, are essential to leading lives of purpose and to their healthy development more generally. This study also served to underscore the need to gain a fuller understanding of what the purposes and positive development of majority world youth entail.

13.4 Conclusion

Our research—and others'—has shed important light on how we can help cultivate purpose in youth and on what purposes look like among diverse groups of young people. However, there is much still to learn.

In the coming years, additional research on several important aspects of purpose is warranted. For instance, to date research has focused on individual purposes; what might a collective sense of purpose look like? Political groups share a purpose, as do groups supporting particular forms of social change, sports teams, and religious congregations. We have launched a study of family purpose, and some of the questions we are examining include: what do collective family purposes look like, how do they form, and how do they endure across generations? We also want to explore how individuals in these families pursue their individual purposes along with their familial ones. Our study represents only one aim in this direction, however. More research on family and other forms of collective purpose is needed.

In addition to examining collective purposes, we also need to examine individual purposes among youth living in diverse locales. In particular, more purpose research featuring young people from majority world countries is needed. The world's youth population is increasingly located in majority world countries (UNFPA, 2014), which means to fully understand what youth purpose looks like and how it shapes young people's lives, this is increasingly where we need to look.

Adolescent and young adult cancer survivors represent another group of young people worthy of research on purpose. Studies find that when individuals perceive a shortened future time horizon, they are more likely to reflect on the things that give their lives meaning (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Feifel, 1969). Most of the time, this happens naturally, as when individuals age (e.g., Carstensen et al., 1999; Nissim et al., 2012), but when young people receive a cancer diagnosis, they too are likely to perceive a shorter future time horizon (Little & Sayers, 2004). Existing

research suggests that young people with purpose are more likely to smoothly navigate a cancer diagnosis (Scheier & Carver, 2001); might it also be the case that being diagnosed with cancer inclines young people to develop a purpose in life? Given that adolescent youth are increasingly likely to survive a cancer diagnosis, exploring this possibility is warranted.

Finally, our research and others' (e.g. Bundick, 2012) have established that it is possible to intentionally cultivate purpose. However, we still know little about how to effectively integrate purpose-fostering programs into schools in large-scale ways. How can we create cultures of purpose in secondary schools? What kinds of activities most effectively and practically, given the scheduling constraints of public education, help larger numbers of young people across this country and beyond discover and lead productive lives of purpose? Empirical investigations into novel approaches to cultivating purpose and rigorous evaluations of existing purpose-fostering programs are needed.

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