



Piercing the Veil of Teen Mental Health

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When we first embarked on creating an educational nonprofit, the QUESTion Project™, we hadn't set out to address the adolescent mental health crisis. Our goal was simpler, yet profoundly ambitious: to help teens explore and connect with who they are, make sense of life, and strengthen their agency to shape their future with purpose. By exploring these fundamental aspects of life together in a semester-long daily class, teens could also connect with each other and experience their common humanity.

The eye-opening journey we undertook working with thousands of high school students led us to insights that would transform our understanding of adolescent well-being—insights deeply fundamental yet largely overlooked in mainstream discourse on the crisis of mental health. As children enter their teenager years and become self-conscious and vulnerable to the thoughts and influence of others, they need to build an authentic connection to who they are. Otherwise, they will feel disconnected from themselves. They need to strengthen the agency to express who they are otherwise they can feel they are a victim of their outer circumstances or other people around them. They need to connect authentically with others, otherwise they will have the illusion of being alone, feel isolated, and feel that they don't belong. And they need to have a sense of direction or purpose, otherwise they may not feel that their lives matter.

We came to understand that because these essential developmental needs of adolescents are unaddressed, teens experience a disconnection from core aspects of their humanity that leaves them deeply vulnerable to mental health challenges, the negative impacts of social media, and other external stressors.

This transformative perspective—that addressing the developmental needs of adolescents helps build foundations of mental health—offers promising implications for supporting youth.

By formally integrating support for these fundamental needs into our educational system, we can tackle the crisis of mental health at a systemic level. We can create a robust foundation for well-being that not only fosters personal strength and resilience in youth but also cultivates healthy relationships with themselves, others, and life. This approach allows us to widen our focus from treating symptoms and external causes (social media, trauma, environmental factors, etc.), to also building teens' core foundations of mental health, offering an authentic part of the solution to the current crisis.

As we stand on the brink of an AI-driven future, in a world changing at an unprecedented pace, the insights we've gained hold significant relevance for our current moment. They offer not only a way to address the crisis but also a

foundation for nurturing the essence of what makes us human, equipping teens with the internal resources to navigate an increasingly complex world and contribute to shaping the future.

In this article, I will bring together theory and practice, along with examples of students' and educators' experiences, to show how supporting teens' developmental needs can play a central and powerful role in addressing the adolescent mental health crisis in our country as well as build the foundations for healthy citizenry.

Addressing Core Developmental Needs of Adolescents: A Breakthrough Method Rooted in Definitive Theory

We created the QUESTion Project initially in collaboration with hundreds of students. Our approach was not founded on academic theory, but in an exploration with teens about what they need in order to embrace their lives and future on a human level. Through this process, we identified four key dimensions of development that proved transformative for students.

These dimensions were, in fact, not new concepts. They aligned with discoveries long recognized by developmental psychologists and scholars as fundamental to healthy adolescent growth. Our breakthrough came not in identifying these needs, but in finding a way to bridge the gap between theory and practice, developing an effective approach and curriculum to address these needs in an engaging way that resonated with teens' lived experiences. Over the course of a semester-long daily class, students often would tell us, "I found myself in this class," "This class is like therapy," and, "I so appreciated hearing the perspectives of others."

These four dimensions of development, recognized by leading researchers as essential for fostering healthy adolescent growth, became holistically embedded in our approach:

- **Identity formation:** Erik Erikson, one of the most influential developmental psychologists, identified adolescence as a stage of "Identity vs. Role Confusion," where individuals grapple with defining their place in the world. Successfully navigating this stage leads to a strong sense of self, while failure results in confusion and instability.¹

¹ Gabriel A. Orenstein and Lindsay Lewis, "Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development," National Library of Medicine (Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing, November 7, 2022), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK556096/>.

- **Agency:** Agency refers to the capacity in people to make their own choices and act autonomously. Recent years have seen extensive research on agency's impact on teen well-being and its role in helping students overcome socioeconomic challenges. There is even a nationwide movement for “Learner-Centered Approach” that encourages teachers to give students more agency over their own learning.
- **Purpose Development:** William Damon, a leading scholar on adolescents’ sense of purpose, emphasizes that “purpose stands out as a key to positive living” at every stage of life². For adolescents, it serves as “the pre-eminent long-term motivator of learning and achievement.” So important is cultivating a strong sense of purpose, he concludes, that “The biggest problem growing up today is not actually stress; it’s meaninglessness.”
- **Connectedness/belonging:** Research by scholars such as David Leary and Edward Twenge highlights that a sense of belonging is crucial for adolescents' mental health, as social connections foster resilience and emotional stability. Their findings indicate that strong relationships enhance self-esteem and play a significant role in helping teens navigate challenges during this critical developmental stage.

Without support for these four foundational elements, adolescents are left with a significant gap in their development, leaving them vulnerable to life's challenges, leading to disconnection from themselves, their lives, others, and society at large. This deficiency creates a perfect storm for mental health issues:

- Without a strong sense of self (*Identity*), teens are much more susceptible to external influences, including the negative effects of social media.
- When youth feel powerless to shape their lives (*Agency*), they may just passively fit in or succumb to learned helplessness, apathy, and a lack of motivation.
- Without a sense of direction (*Purpose*), adolescents can fall into existential crises, feel adrift, and struggle to engage with schools and their future.
- In the absence of genuine human connections (*Connectedness*), teens may retreat into isolation, exacerbating feelings of loneliness and social disconnection.

Indeed, these core dimensions of being human—a strong sense of self, the confidence to express and act on that self, a sense of purpose that provides direction, and meaningful connections with others—form the foundation of well-

² William Damon Ph.D., “Purpose and the Life Review,” Psychology Today, 2021, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-puzzles-of-your-past/202107/purpose-and-the-life-review>.

being. By helping young people develop these essential dimensions, we can support teens to connect with themselves, with life, and with each other.

Challenges to Systemic Change

Despite compelling theoretical evidence that identity, agency, purpose, and connectedness are essential to adolescent well-being and capacity to thrive as individuals and members of society, they are generally not prioritized in U.S. secondary education. This neglect stems in part from the challenge of creating effective methods for implementation. Efforts to support students are often focused on narrowly defined outcomes or specific skills, failing to address the underlying humanity that guides teens in practicing and integrating these skills.

For instance, teaching students to label aspects of their identity—such as race, gender, and religion—at an early age can inadvertently narrow what identity means and can obscure teens' evolving nature rather than engage them in exploring the core of who they are. Some of these approaches have been oversimplified or poorly implemented, which has contributed to societal backlash against social-emotional learning.

More critically, by not addressing these fundamental aspects of students' humanity, schools unintentionally perpetuate a priority on students' achievement at the expense of further developing who they are and who they want to become.

These challenges highlight the urgent need to focus on core developmental needs of teens and to develop holistic, human-centered approaches that effectively translate these crucial developmental dimensions into practical educational strategies. By nurturing the whole student and providing them with tools to navigate their complex inner and outer worlds, we can create a seismic shift in how we prepare our youth for the future.

How Did We Get Here?

It's easy to blame the rapid advance of technology for the intensifying mental health crisis in adolescents. While technological advances and social media have been profound accelerants, complicating the journey of self-discovery, a host of other forces have combined to bring us to this point. To fully appreciate what our youth are dealing with, it's helpful to consider the historical and cultural context in which today's adolescents are growing up.

A few generations prior, society would dictate and hand us an understanding and roadmap of “reality”. Whether commendable or lamentable, this "map" outlined 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. Although these cultural narratives imposed limitations, they also offered a sense of certainty and stability.

Today, these prescribed narratives no longer hold the same weight and certainty in defining who we are and our direction in life. As a result, adolescents are largely left to their own devices to understand themselves, life, and their place in it. This shift has left many youth feeling lost, confused, and in the dark without the means needed to chart a path to their future. Consequently, teenagers grapple with intense feelings of disconnection, anxiety, and isolation, struggling to find their way in a world that seems increasingly chaotic and uncertain.

Atop these challenges, youth are bombarded with images and messages that fuel concerns about self-image and drive them to project inauthentic versions of themselves on social media and in their lives. The struggle for authenticity is further complicated by a growing distrust in media's portrayal of facts and events, leaving young people uncertain about what information they can rely on as they form their identities and worldviews.

The rapid advancement of AI technology is set to amplify these challenges exponentially. As AI-generated content becomes more sophisticated, we will face increasing difficulty in distinguishing between genuine human expression and artificial creations. This blurring of lines will further complicate teens’ journey toward authentic connection with themselves, others, and the world around them.

In this new landscape, the role of parents and educators is crucial, especially during the pivotal transition from adolescence to independent adulthood. Our most promising solution lies in providing teens with opportunities to develop an internal compass that helps to ground them as they find and chart their unique path. This guidance from within can replace the outdated scripts of the past, enabling young people to uncover their authentic selves and determine their own directions in life.

In this way, we not only address the immediate mental health crisis but also empower the next generation to thrive in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world.

Teens as Dynamic, Evolving Beings

In an educational ethos that is overly focused on concrete outcomes and fixed answers, it is easy for methods that engage students with identity, agency, purpose, and connectedness to steer youth too much toward static conclusions and narrowly defined skills. However, the true potential of these four areas of development lies not in steering teens toward predetermined conclusions about life and who they are, but in allowing teens to experience the *depth of engagement itself* and the authentic connection it can create to their lives and futures. For example:

Identity: Teens who connect deeply with who they are have a much stronger foundation for navigating life and a complex world than those who have narrowed down who they are to a set of labels.

Agency: Teens who recognize that their lives and futures are in their own hands—and that they can be the authors of their own stories—are better equipped than those who have been given choices over their learning and actions alone.

Purpose: While it may seem helpful for teens to pin down “their purpose” in life, doing so can impose limitations as it assumes that we can be animated by only one purpose. Connecting teens to the inner drive toward purpose creates a foundation that allows them to identify how purpose can shift or evolve in different stages in their lives.

Connectedness: Teens who connect with others on a human level will develop more meaningful relationships than those who are simply taught communication or relationship skills.

When we reduce the outcomes of these four areas into a set of definitive conclusions or neatly defined skills, we risk leading students to view themselves as static entities with fixed characteristics, which can perpetuate an unwholesome disconnection from themselves. When teens struggle to understand their identity and place in the world, they may feel isolated and ill-equipped to navigate life’s complexities, which can increase their vulnerability to mental health issues. Instead, our approach should open doors to the depth and wonder of who they are, embracing the complexity and the ongoing unfolding of life and self-discovery.

1. Developing an Authentic Identity: Guiding Teens to Connect Deeply with Who They Are

At the core of adolescents' mental health is defining and understanding who they are. An authentic identity is essential for dealing with life's challenges and traumas. Without this, they are like a ship without a rudder, making them much more vulnerable to life's storms and to the forces that could pull them away from being authentically themselves.

The key to supporting teens with identity development lies in understanding that identity is an ongoing process of discovery and creation. While it might seem logical to uncover teens' identity by simply asking them a series of questions about likes, dislikes, passions, preferences, cultural identity, gender, and sexual orientation in an effort to help students to "know thyself," this approach narrows and oversimplifies the dynamic nature of identity formation.

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. Identity formation goes beyond labels. 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.

In working with teens, we noticed that students connected naturally with who they are because they had a space to authentically be themselves and engage with core aspects of life. We learn by doing—think of the toddler learning the complexity of walking by first crawling, then pulling up to stand, and then finally walking. In the same vein, students find themselves by being themselves, experiencing first-hand the fluid and evolving nature of identity. Rather than assigning labels, this approach allows students to first connect with what stirs in their hearts and minds, with who they are deep down, and who they want to become, and then explore, question, and ongoingly shape their identity through genuine experiences and reflections. If we understand that it is the sense of disconnection from oneself that challenges our well-being, then the solution is to *connect* with who we are, not necessarily to *define* who we are.

I heard the most vivid example from Rabia, a freshman at Bronx Center for Science and Mathematics, when she shared her experience after taking the

QUESTion class: “Before the class, you would just see me walking down the hallways at school with no emotion on my face, or like there’s nothing going on in my mind, like I have no feelings like some kind of robot, but after the class, I could actually feel something; I have all these thoughts and ideas I get to share in class and listen to others and how they feel, and that has been incredibly empowering.”

Designing methods to support identity development means giving students space to engage with multiple facets of themselves—from aspirations and fears to cultural backgrounds and passions. We must also recognize that identity is dynamic, evolving over time, while shaped both individually and collectively. It comprises layers—some deeply defining, like a commitment to justice, and others perhaps less so, such as preferences in music genres. Crucially, we must make room for certain aspects of identity that may be so profound and expansive that they may defy any attempt at definition.

We saw a powerful example of the transformative power of understanding one's identity at this deep level during a visit to Fashion Industries High School in Manhattan. In the QUESTion Class that day, students engaged in a "River of Life" activity, drawing a river with “twists and turns” representing their life journey from birth to the present. Through this activity, students reflected on which turns in the river (positive or negative) were influenced by external events and which were shaped by their own choices. After they assessed how their own choices impacted the river’s direction, they considered their agency to shape the future course of that river.

A fourteen-year-old girl shared the content of her river—a life journey 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 yet you are expressing 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.”

For this brave teenager, an authentic sense of who she was deep down became a source of strength for dealing with life’s adversity and overwhelming traumatic experiences, enabling her to be the author of her own life and see her future in a positive light. We've witnessed many students make a shift in how

they relate to life's challenges and traumas as they connect with who they are. From identifying too much with an adverse event—which can result in these experiences defining who they are—they can come to view it as something that has happened to them that they can speak to without victimization, with more distance, and with an unusual objectivity. By connecting with themselves, teens discover an inner strength they didn't know they had.

A teen who is not connected to who they are is more likely to be tempted to project a false image of themselves and get caught up in the dark side of social media, while a teen who has an authentic sense of themselves will be less drawn to do that and can instead benefit from the positive side of social media. If we lead teens to define their identity in static ways, we risk reducing their sense of self to a mere self-image, a set of labels, or an adopted role. This fixed self-concept can easily crumble when faced with life's challenges, potentially resulting in depression and other forms of mental distress. In contrast, an authentic identity that emerges from students' humanity holds the most promise for self and for society. It serves as a foundation for wholesome character and citizenry to develop and stabilize, enabling them to navigate their lives with resilience and inspiration.

2. Strengthening Agency: Empowering Teens as Authors of Their Own Lives and Futures

Agency gives youth a sense of control, ownership, and power over their own lives, as well as a sense of ongoing possibilities. It is the antidote to the helplessness and low self-efficacy associated with various mental health issues. Agency also makes it possible for teens to explore and develop different dimensions of their identity. Without agency, aspects of who they are may remain unexpressed, leaving them vulnerable to a subtle sense of disconnect from themselves.

Like identity, the concept of agency in adolescent development is often over-simplified, focusing primarily on its most tangible aspects. In educational settings, agency is frequently limited to students' taking responsibility for their own learning or, in underprivileged communities, empowering their agency to overcome socioeconomic challenges. While these are crucial facets of agency, this narrow, practical focus overlooks a critical dimension: the agency for teens to uncover and authentically express who they are in their engagement with school, college, their future, life, and others.

This oversight is a prime example of how our current approaches often fail to address the whole child. Students need an outlet to understand and engage with their impending transition to adulthood and with the reality that their lives will soon be entirely their responsibility. Providing opportunities for this exploration empowers students to develop greater self-determination and responsibility. Full agency encompasses not just our actions and responsibilities, but also our capacity to understand ourselves, life, and our purpose in being here.

A more comprehensive approach to fostering agency would encourage self-expression and authenticity in multiple contexts, support students in making choices aligned with their evolving sense of self, provide opportunities for teens to influence their learning environment and educational journey, and empower students to navigate and shape their relationships and social interactions while considering their roles as citizens.

By broadening our understanding and implementation of agency, we can help adolescents develop a more robust sense of self-efficacy and autonomy. This holistic approach not only enhances their ability to take action and responsibility but also strengthens their capacity to navigate the complex landscape of personal growth and societal expectations. The purpose of providing youth with an outlet is not so that they will necessarily come up with final answers, but that **they will feel that the whole of their lives is in their hands**, and that they are free to define their future for themselves.

On a visit to Alliance Marine Innovation & Technology 6-12 Complex in Los Angeles, we witnessed a moving example of the power of empowering students with this level of autonomy. We had invited students 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!” Of course, we all wanted to know more. With a big smile, she replied, “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 peoples’ 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. Her peers, too,

were confused about life, so she was not alone: “We’re only fifteen years old. We are not supposed to have to have it all figured out!”

Maria’s story illustrates how “therapeutic” it can be to give students the agency to shape their own narratives in life instead of blindly following the narratives of society. As Maria’s experience demonstrated, even without coming up with clear answers or direction, the sense of having ownership over one’s life is so empowering that it can transform the experience of confusion about life from something that causes anxiety to an experience of “breakthrough.”

As parents and educators, we want young people to take responsibility for their lives and futures. However, we often assign them tasks and responsibilities without fostering the foundational sense of agency that connects their sense of purpose and who they are to their actions. This lack of support can make it difficult for them to make sense of life and their role as citizens. Metaphorically speaking, we rush adolescents into the boat of adulthood without teaching them how to navigate, yet we expect them to be responsible for themselves and even for others.

To trust young people 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 illuminate and engage an inner compass, dispelling the often-unconscious sense that something is wrong or missing in their lives. Being in touch with their inner compass allows them to embrace and navigate life’s complexities and the inspiring possibilities ahead. At its fullest potential, it can inspire their creativity, care, passion, and interest, enabling them to bring out the best in themselves, and contribute to society in a way that aligns with their deepest inner stirrings.

As the seas of our outer world become more turbulent and disorienting, empowering teens with the agency to be authors of their own lives elevates the role of education, helping nurture the engaged and responsible citizens who are so important for our future.

3. Pursuing Purpose: Connecting Teens to a Sence of Direction in Life

Purpose brings a meaningful sense of direction to agency, and a reason for being here. It connects teens’ identity to others, to life and to a larger context. It serves as a powerful antidote to hopelessness and despair, giving them the feeling that their lives matter, that they have a compass within, and that there is a compelling future ahead.

Purpose, like identity and agency, encompasses both tangible and

intangible dimensions. Some aspects are easily articulated, such as a particular activity or a cause. Others are more elusive and profound, manifesting as vision, inspiration, concern, intuition, joy, fun, or even love. Connecting teens with the internal, less tangible aspects of purpose, and the conditions necessary for its development, is crucial, even though these aspects can be harder to define.

On a visit to Ms. Salim's QUESTion Class at Bronx Leadership Academy, we witnessed a striking instance of how connecting teens with the deeper, less visible aspects of purpose can unveil profound dimensions of identity that often remain hidden. Ms. Salim asked them to consider and list activities they regularly engage in that hold meaning for them. One student, initially leaning back in his chair and appearing disengaged, finally agreed to let someone else share the first item on his list: "I get up every morning." It might have been easy to assume that this reluctant student lacked a sense of purpose. However, with unwavering dedication to helping students connect with themselves, Ms. Salim persisted, asking students to explain why each activity was meaningful. The student's response was, "because I can be productive." Ms. Salim encouraged students to delve deeper, repeatedly asking why, to uncover the fundamental reasons behind their sense of purpose. I watched as this student, initially unsure of how to respond, began getting more clear "so I can get a job . . . so I can support myself . . ." and, after further probing, finally revealed, "Because I have a vision that I want to bring out."

This student's experience illustrates that adolescents can have a strong, yet deeply internal, connection to a sense of purpose that may not yet be conscious or fully developed. During a 45-minute class, he and other students had the opportunity to uncover this connection, allowing them to engage more deeply with their own lives and with a source of intrinsic motivation. We all need concrete and direct ways to engage with and become aware of the intangible aspects of purpose that drive us; otherwise, these aspects can easily remain hidden or take decades to surface, as they did for me.

Educational approaches that reduce purpose to a single 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 limiting. 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' ability to attune to the quiet inner promptings of purpose. We often hear students express relief when they grasp that purpose can take many forms and can change over time. 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?

The power of connecting with purpose beyond a specific action or cause was illustrated powerfully by Courtney, a student we met in the first year of implementing the QUESTion Class. At the end of that year, we met with each student to review the self-assessment they had completed at the start and end of the class. One of the six areas covered in the assessment was purpose. Courtney had indicated that she had gone from the lowest rating to the highest rating for this statement: "I have a sense of direction and purpose in life." When she was asked about that, she responded excitedly, "Yes, the class really helped me find my purpose." Then, with a quizzical look, she added "But wait, how can that be? I have no idea what I'm going to do when I graduate next month!" Reflecting further, she shared that she had developed such a deep connection to purpose that she did not need a specific way for it to manifest, and she had confidence that she would find her way. A year later, this insight was reflected in a moving [blog](#) she wrote in the Huffington Post entitled "Finding Selflessness," about shifting from despair to purpose while working at TGI Fridays.

If we only address aspects of the whole child that can be labeled and defined, not making room for the complexity and uncertainty that are part of human nature and of life, we do students a disservice. Britney Kiki, one of the first public high school students to take the QUESTion Class at Bronx Center for Science and Mathematics, captured this point with 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.

4. Connecting with Others: Dispelling Teens' Illusion That They Are Fundamentally Alone

Connectedness is the antidote to alienation, isolation, and a transactional relationship with life and others. On the more tangible levels, activities such as sports, clubs, or collaborative projects can foster meaningful connections among teens and are more common. Providing teens with an outlet to connect around their journey of life—who they are and how they relate to each other—is far less common, yet its potential to break down boundaries of isolation is far greater. This type of exploration together exposes teens to universal human experiences and to their common humanity. It allows students to express aspects of themselves to others that they might otherwise never reveal.

Such engagement encourages teens to connect more personally and with vulnerability, sparking curiosity about the experiences of others. The most consistent feedback we receive in student assessments at the end of the QUESTion Class is how much students appreciate hearing the diverse perspectives of their peers. We also noticed that, in their self-assessments completed at the start and end of the classes, many students indicated a significant shift from feeling very little connection with others at the beginning, to a high degree of connection with others at the end. I asked one student, who had made the most dramatic shift possible: “What was it that made such a big shift for you? Was it that you made new friends in this class?” She replied, “It’s not that I made new friends, but I showed more of who I am in this class than I usually do and I saw other students do the same. That made me feel so much more connected.”

The decline of social capital in America and its impact on isolation has been a subject of significant research. In his seminal work *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, published in 2000³, renowned political scientist Robert Putnam of Harvard University highlighted how societal changes have led to increased disconnection among individuals. Putnam's widely recognized research underscores that a significant factor contributing to isolation throughout history is the feeling that people are not "in it together."

³ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

Young people need intentionally designed outlets to connect more deeply and experience their common journey of life. There are few pathways for this kind of engagement in our culture. When teens can engage with their peers around common human questions, concerns, hopes, fears, and the quest to make sense of their lives and futures, barriers come down, and they realize they are not alone.

Recognizing our shared human journey is fundamental to mental health. It dispels the illusion of isolation and the belief that nobody "sees" or understands us. This recognition also lays the groundwork for the natural development of ethics, respect for others, inclusivity, and citizenship, as it reveals the essence of what unites us as human beings. At the heart of extreme division and polarization lies a disconnection from the humanity of others. Dehumanizing others enables us to justify harmful actions. Conversely, when we experience each other's humanity, the resulting sense of connectedness brings out the best in us. This has important implications for moral development, character development, and society.

In our conversations with teachers, we heard powerful examples of the impact of fostering connectedness on the breaking down of barriers between students. Mr. Sandrowicz, a teacher of math and dean at TAPCO high school in the Bronx, has a rare capacity to create space for students to be themselves and listen to each other. He told us after the first year of facilitating the QUESTion Class, "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." 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 together."

This kind of intimacy and vulnerability among teenagers (which often includes the teacher) is something that generally happens at best only between very close friends and family members. There are important implications for society when students are able to recognize each other's humanity in a larger setting with peers with whom they would not usually associate.

Identity, Agency, Purpose, and Connectedness as Interrelated Facets of teen's Humanity

Our current educational paradigm tends to compartmentalize learning and fragment students' lives-into parts. Therefore, it's common to approach the four foundational areas of adolescent well-being and development I've outlined as separate, independent dimensions.

In our commitment to engaging the whole child, it's crucial to approach these dimensions as interrelated parts of one humanity. For instance, agency plays a vital role in the unfolding of identity, as teens can discover more about who they are by having the agency to be themselves. For many young people, a sense of purpose and inspiration may not emerge until they have a stronger sense of who they are. Some may experience moments of inspiration and purpose, but purpose can be difficult to pursue if they lack the agency, confidence, and sense of empowerment to truly make a difference.

Engaging these core 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.⁴

This fundamental connecting with oneself and with one's future and purpose, in a collective context, can help provide immunity from the many external factors that can undermine adolescents' mental health and well-being. Without such a foundation, students are acutely vulnerable to life's many challenges, particularly as they transition to young adulthood and need outlets to engage and make sense of that transition. I believe it is in large part because we do not provide these outlets for adolescents that we have an epidemic of loneliness, depression, and suicide. Indeed, in my view, the lack of developmental support for teens in these four areas is a recipe for disaster.

Meeting This Moment in Time

Our education system, both public and private, is falling woefully short in supporting students' well-being and assuming their roles as engaged citizens. This systemic failure is exemplified by the widespread isolation and division in our country, and the difficulties many students, even at elite colleges, face in connecting with and valuing diverse perspectives. Our youth today face not only

⁴ 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.

challenges to their mental health and well-being but are also, in many ways, unprepared for the complexities of our current moment.

The static way that our culture encourages us to relate to who we are, to what we are meant to do in life, and to interpret many issues through static ideas, is a reflection of how education has not activated students' agency to think critically and define their lives for themselves on a foundation of their own humanity, one that can serve as a compass and a source of inspiration for the road ahead. The dearth of leadership across societal sectors and our stunted care for communities mirror how education has neglected to provide outlets for youth to pursue purpose as an expression of care for something greater than themselves. Indeed, the mental health crisis is, in part, a reflection of an educational system that treats students as objects of learning and development, further perpetuating a state of disconnection from self, life, and others.

All of this is happening as our youth are growing up against a backdrop of global flux, where the once-stable pillars of society are now viewed with uncertainty. Recent conflicts around the world, increasing polarization in the West, and mounting environmental concerns contribute to a sense of insecurity about the stability of our lives ahead.

As we anticipate the promise of AI, we also grapple with the uncertainty of a world on the brink of transformative change. This nexus of rapid technological advancement, outpacing our capacity to respond morally and collectively to global challenges, threatens to further disconnect us from our humanity. However, it also creates an opportunity to expand education's very purpose: anchoring students deeply in *what makes us human*.

Being grounded in who we are, having a sense of agency not just for our own lives, but for society, and pursuing the future with purpose, will give teens a foundation and a compass for the map-less road ahead.

The Implications for Schools and Society

Although it is crucial to mitigate the challenges to adolescents' mental health—including those related to social media, environmental stressors, isolation, family dysfunction, biological predispositions, and trauma—completely shielding our youth from harmful influences is impossible. Therefore, it is critical to equip the next generation with a strong sense of their authentic self, fostering their ability to navigate life's complexities and thrive amidst adversity. This broadened focus—expanding from external mitigation of challenges to include internal

cultivation—represents a paradigm change in how we conceive of education's role in supporting mental health and shaping future generations. It's not just about adding programs or classes. It's about reimagining the very purpose and method of education to align with the deepest needs of human development.

Parents can play a significant role, but their efforts alone are insufficient. Implementing this framework requires a systematic approach. Meeting the developmental needs of teens offers a path to truly support the whole child, preparing them not just for what they will do but also for who they are in our complex world and in the human family. Schools are uniquely positioned to implement this, because they bring together students from diverse backgrounds, making it possible for interpersonal barriers to be dismantled—barriers that, if left unaddressed, will invariably become ingrained in the broader fabric of society. In this collective environment, teens can learn from one another and experience their common humanity, creating the conditions for the development of a sense of personal identity, citizenry, and common good. Experience of our shared humanity is the foundation for resolving the divisive collective identities and polarization that are tearing our country apart. If we don't achieve this through education, how else will we achieve it broadly?

We must expand how we define education in order to envision its role in creating the future. The notion that high school primarily serves to prepare students for college and careers is severely limited. While individual achievement has its place, education must focus equally on laying the foundations for individual and societal well-being through meaningful engagement with oneself, life, and others. This shift is particularly vital in Western contexts, where a strong focus on individual achievement can obscure our natural connections to each other and the recognition of our shared human journey.

Implementing this vision entails challenging and building on the current educational paradigm constructively, identifying critical gaps. Teachers must be trained in the complex skills and dispositions needed to fully engage students' humanity. This vision needs to embrace a long-term endeavor to meet the needs of students and society through a curated, ongoing journey of development defined by age-appropriate approaches and evaluation. We cannot leave this to chance or rely solely on the efforts of independently inspired teachers. As parents, educators, and concerned citizens, we must actively pursue the creation of intentional developmental spaces for teens that support the four developmental dimensions, while learning from diverse approaches. Early

experimentation and analysis can serve as a foundation for a much-needed new subject field in education.

We advocate anchoring this approach in education with the same significance as core subjects, supporting children and adolescents through various programs at every stage of their educational journey. Following this path will not only address our society's most pressing challenges—from youth mental health to social fragmentation—but inspire an ongoing unfolding of our shared humanity.

Centering What Makes Us Human in Education Benefits Both Students and Educators

As we enter an age of AI, addressing the developmental needs of teens is an opportunity to prioritize what makes us human. These dimensions are inherent in youth but need outlets for expression, building the depth of authenticity, agency, care, connectedness, and wisdom that are foundational for a thriving society.

This shift to prioritize what makes us human is central for students and educators alike. Principal Michael Barakat at Bronx High School for Law and Community Service shared a very moving example of this in his role as principal. Mr. Barakat had originally been assigned as Principal of the school at a time when it was labeled a “low performing school” by the department of education. He 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 the Bronx Center for Science and Mathematics, a nearby public high school.

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 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. It sparked a passion and creativity through which he dramatically turned his school 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—our love—for students. As educators, providing students with space to engage with the deeper layers of what makes them human can give us that space as well. It can empower us 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 fixed ideas or doctrines, however positive or well-intentioned, or reducing students’ inner worlds to a set of skills or labels. Walking this path with students, we can create room for the depth and mystery of who they are, what life is about, and—perhaps most importantly—equip them for their journey into the future.

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I’m most grateful to the public high school students, teachers, and principals, who co-created this approach with us, as well as all the subsequent groups of students and teachers who had the courage to authentically explore life in this meaningful way together. They are the ones who are taking this work beyond a nice-sounding theory, demonstrating what is possible.

My gratitude also goes out to Mr. Corminbeauf, my science teacher at the incredibly strict boarding school I attended in Switzerland when I was 10 years old. He had surmised that I had likely stolen a few items from one of my peers. He

quietly pulled me aside one day, saying that circumstances would indicate that I had taken those items. With utmost kindness and respect, adding that if I needed things he would help me get them, he invited me to do the right thing and return these items. He was the first person I can remember who reached out and touched my humanity. Even though I did not have the courage to respond to it at the time, it impacted me deeply. His spirit is present in this article.

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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 Rusconi. 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, building a life of purpose, and connecting authentically with others.

In recognition for his achievement and contribution to youth development as an immigrant, Gerard was awarded the prestigious Ellis Island Medal of Honor.

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...*together*
- **Supports Mental Health and Social-Emotional Wellbeing** by creating a foundation of self-knowledge, authentic identity, and connectedness 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.