

SCCCE Insight Series

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What role does **PURPOSE** play in CCE?





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Staying Grounded in Purpose

Angelina Low Poh Sim & Jallene Chua Jia En



Dear Reader,

As many of us may experience, AI has become increasingly enmeshed with education and our daily lives, which is precisely why it was the subject of our inaugural issue “**CCE in an AI-Mediated World**”. There, we asked what the rise of Artificial Intelligence means for Character and Citizenship Education (CCE).

Broadly, the authors recognised that AI brings both unprecedented opportunity and serious risk, and called for the cultivation of digital wisdom, intentional character learning processes, and the irreplaceable role of human relationships. Crucially, they affirmed that teachers must be supported not only in using AI tools competently, but in being purposeful and principled designers of learning experiences that allow students to grow in their overall character.

In writing this issue, it became clear that AI could not answer for us why this issue matters, and to whom. That

is a question of **purpose**, and it was one only we could answer and write about. We think that in an era of not just AI but other complex global and societal forces, educators and students alike need a clear sense of who they are and what they care about, which strongly relates to our sense of purpose.

This second issue, therefore, turns to that question directly: **What role does purpose play in CCE?** In putting this issue together, we drew on a deliberately wide range of voices from local to global contexts, including researchers and practitioners, who have both studied purpose and worked towards cultivating it in schools. Reading across their contributions, we found common threads running through all of them, which we have summarised here as the “**what,**” “**why,**” and “**how**” of **purpose in CCE**. We hope that you will enjoy exploring each idea in greater depth in the articles ahead.



“ In an era of not just AI but other complex, global and societal forces, educators and students alike need a clear sense of who they are and what they care about, which strongly relates to our sense of purpose.”

What Purpose Is

Purpose, as we understand it, is richer and more complex than the everyday sense of a personal interest or ambition. As the psychologist William Damon puts it in his influential definition and as several articles in this issue draw on, purpose is a **“long-lasting intention to accomplish something meaningful not only to oneself, but to the world beyond the self”** (Damon et al, 2003; Damon, 2008).

Drawing on research in their Synthesis & Insights article, Dr Melvin Chan and Dr Lim May Li unpack the concept further, explaining purpose through **three interrelated dimensions, cognitive, behavioural, and motivational**, as well as differentiating it from related but distinct ideas such as “goals” and “meaning.” As highlighted by Dr Jeffrey Chan in his In Practice article, purpose is also understood as an **ongoing and developmental process**, developing progressively as young people explore their identity, values, aspirations, and contributions beyond themselves. In addition, Dr Melvin Chan and Dr Lim May Li highlight the **importance of context**, where purpose develops through the environmental, relational, and structural contexts young people are in. In a similar vein, Professor Kendall

Cotton Bronk, in her interview with us, highlighted real, cultural differences she has observed in how purpose is understood and pursued from one setting to another.

Why it Matters

As noted by Dr Melvin Chan and Dr Lim May Li, purpose has been linked to a wide range of **positive developmental outcomes**, including flourishing, identity formation, and prosocial engagement. In our interview with Professor Kendall Bronk, she echoes that purpose is associated with not just psychological health, professional and academic outcomes, but even physical health. Despite this, purpose remains elusive for many young people: research both overseas and local suggests that only around **one in four or five adolescents are considered fully purposeful** (Damon, 2008; Heng & Pereira, 2020).

In their In Practice article, Associate Professor Mary Anne Heng and Hazel Peh suggest that there may be scope to give greater attention to purpose in Singapore’s educational context. While there has been a strong national emphasis towards holistic development, purpose may not yet be consistently or explicitly integrated into the everyday curriculum and pedagogical experiences through which students make sense of themselves, others, and the world around them. Given the growing evidence of its importance for young people’s development, the authors invite educators to consider how purpose might be more **intentionally supported in practice**.

How to Develop Purpose

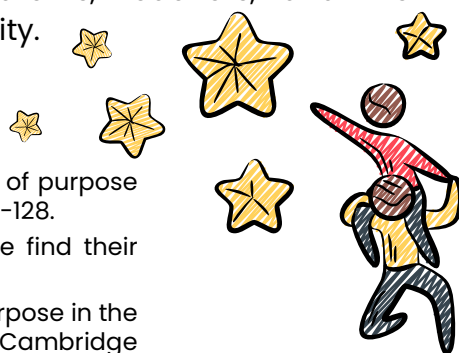
How then might schools and educators close this gap? In the In Practice articles, Associate Professor Mary Anne Heng and Hazel Peh offer a set of **guiding principles for embedding purpose into everyday school life**, and Dr Jeffrey Chan introduces a practical **3M-to-2M framework**, which describes how **Mirroring, Modeling, and Mentoring** can be used with students to help them cultivate Meaning and Mattering. He also shares how the Education and Career Guidance Branch at MOE has developed a set of **Purpose Conversation Cards**, designed for use across a range of educational contexts.

Although purpose has been more widely understood in adolescence, Professor Kendall Bronk points to possible foundations that schools can nurture from as early as the primary years. These include **agency, belonging, and curiosity**, from which a sense of purpose can

later take root.

The contributors also emphasise that purpose should not be developed in isolation from character and social-emotional skills. Professor Kendall Bronk describes **purpose and character as “two sides of the same coin”**, while Professor Maurice Elias traces this same anchoring across his own career: social-emotional skills, he argues, need to be anchored in character to give them positive direction, which is how social-emotional and character development (SECD) came about. Now, his work has turned to an additional integration with purpose and **mattering**: the sense that a school is a place where students feel welcomed, valued, and able to contribute.

Finally, Professor Maurice Elias highlights that purpose development is a **communal process**, involving peers, parents, teachers, and the community.



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About the Authors



Angelina Low Poh Sim is Deputy Director at the Singapore Centre for Character and Citizenship Education, NIE, NTU, Singapore.



Jallene Chua Jia En is a psychologist and Senior Research Associate at the Singapore Centre for Character and Citizenship Education, NIE, NTU, Singapore.

Understanding Purpose: A Synthesis of the Research on Purpose

Dr Melvin Chan & Dr Lim May Li



What does it mean for a young person to live a purposeful life?

Ask a random group of students, and many will likely point to things that they are doing, enjoy, or hope to do: doing well in school, getting a job they enjoy, or achieving personal goals such as excelling in sports, earning lots of money, or simply being happy. Many, in fact a substantial number, may simply say, "I don't know".

In this practical everyday sense lies the common understanding of purpose as a deeply personal pursuit. But purpose is more than a passing interest or preference to do something or be someone. It involves

a sustained commitment to goals that not only matter to the individual but should also lead to productive engagement with the broader world.

Put simply, it reflects an intentional forward-looking desire to contribute to something larger than oneself. This need not involve grand aspirations but could be expressed through commitments to family and friends, to schools and communities, to society, or to meaningful social causes. By this richer definition of purpose, the examples students typically offer reflect only a partial account of what purpose truly entails.

Conceptualisation of Purpose

While several conceptualisations exist, purpose is most commonly defined in research as “a stable and generalisable intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (Damon et al., 2003). This conception integrates three interrelated dimensions: a **cognitive dimension**, reflecting clarity of and commitment to a personally meaningful, future-oriented goal; a **behavioural dimension**, reflecting active engagement in pursuit of that goal; and a **motivational dimension**, reflecting an intention to contribute to the world beyond oneself. Throughout this article, we refer to these three dimensions simply as **intention**, **engagement**, and a **beyond-the-self orientation**.

Out of these three dimensions, what has increasingly come to define purpose, and distinguish it from merely self-serving aims, is the dimension of contribution beyond-the-self, a “desire to make a difference in the world, to contribute to matters larger than the self” (Damon et al., 2003), rather than for the sole benefit of the self. As some purposes may be driven by self-serving or even harmful reasons, this dimension highlights the criticality of **anchoring purpose in moral values and an empathetic concern for others**. When purpose is directed toward morally grounded ends, young people are more likely to “follow through on long-term goals, engage in socially responsible behaviour, show agency in

identifying and acting on issues that concern them, and have an impact in the world” (Malin et al., 2017).

However, rather than seeing this as a dichotomy between **self-oriented and beyond-the-self motives**, it may be more helpful to recognise that these two orientations **are not mutually exclusive**; one does not preclude the other and both orientations can co-exist. In fact, among purposeful individuals, these orientations are expected to be integrated (Malin et al., 2014).

Figure 1 maps how these three dimensions, intention, active engagement, and beyond-the-self orientation, combine to produce different profiles of purpose, from dreaming and dabbling through to self-serving and, where all three are present, fully purposeful.

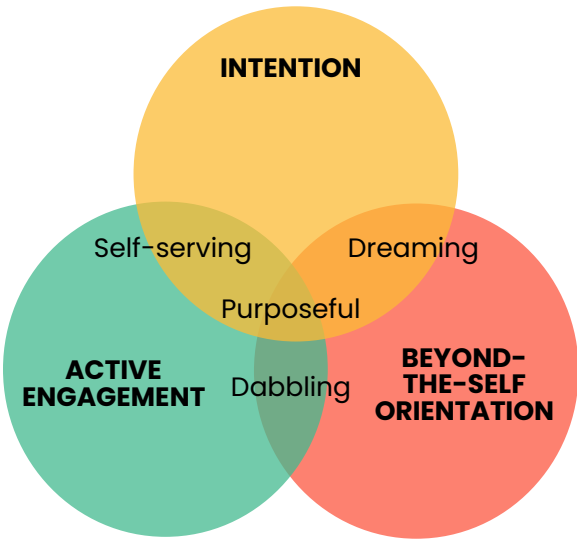


Figure 1: Purpose Dimensions and Forms

Having unpacked what purpose is, it is worth asking what it is not. 'Purpose' is often used loosely in everyday language, and could be

conflated with related ideas such as goals and meaning in life. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between these concepts as well.

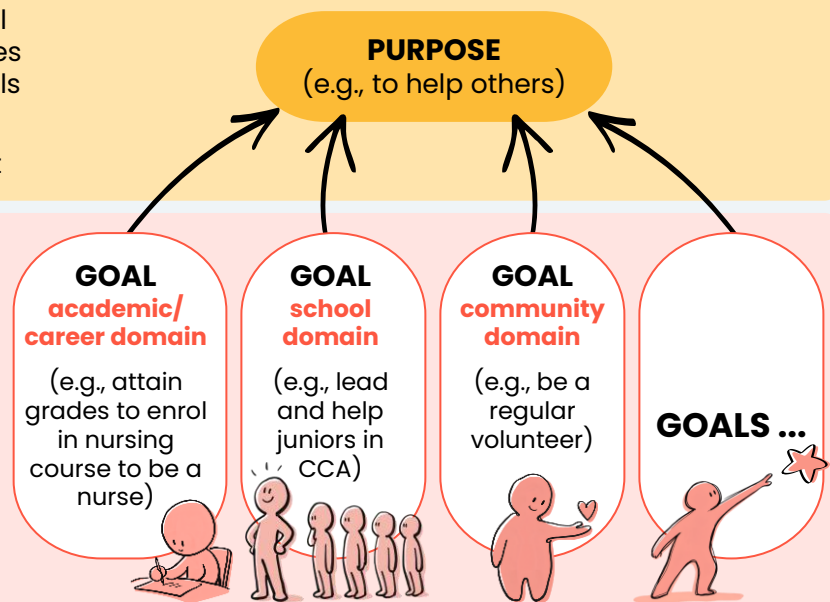
Purpose vs. Everyday Goals

What differentiates purpose from our everyday goals is that purpose is **not bound by a definite time frame** and **sits high up in the hierarchy of goals** (Damon et al., 2003; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Educational or career aspirations are often conflated with purpose (Moran, 2016). While these aspirations may indeed reflect or serve a purpose, purpose itself refers to the broader life aim that sits above such context-specific goals with conceivable endpoints.

Purpose may be likened to a **"supraordinate goal manager"** that gives us direction and guides lower-level, specific goals across time and contexts (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Purpose is therefore inherently goal-oriented and forward-looking. As Damon et al. (2003) put it, purpose "is always directed at an accomplishment towards which one can make progress". Without engagement, or action, intentions remain as dreams (Malin et al., 2014).

- Supraordinate goal manager that drives and organises goals
- Ongoing, with no definable endpoint

- Serves purpose
- Often have conceivable endpoints



Purpose vs. Meaning

Purpose and meaning in life have been used interchangeably, both in everyday life and in research. While these concepts are closely intertwined, they are distinct. First, **meaning in life is a broader construct** that encompasses purpose (Martela & Steger, 2016). Research has shown that purpose in life is only one aspect of laypeople's understanding of meaning in life (Li et al., 2021). Second, **meaning is a subjective sense of coherence and significance that can be derived from the pursuit of purpose**. However, while purpose may generate meaning, meaning "does not always drive purpose" (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009).

Purpose Development in Adolescence

Adolescence is a critical period for purpose development, and much of the research on purpose has centred on this developmental stage. A growing body of research affirms that purpose in life is associated with a wide range of positive developmental outcomes. Purpose has been conceptualised as a developmental asset linked to indicators of flourishing, and associated with greater psychological well-being, identity development, and prosocial engagement among youth (*Bronk et al., 2024; Damon et al., 2003; Damon, 2008; Liang & Klein, 2022*). Despite these positive outcomes, a sense of purpose remains uncommon among many young people, including those in Singapore.

How Common is Purpose Among Adolescents?

Research shows that demonstrating all three dimensions of purpose is relatively rare among adolescents. Studies conducted in the US revealed that **only around one in four or five adolescents are considered fully purposeful** (*Damon, 2008*), a statistic similarly observed locally (*Heng & Pereira, 2020*). Other adolescents were found to demonstrate only one or two of the purpose dimensions. Some may have formed a purpose intention but are not actively pursuing it (dreamers), some may be actively engaged in life aims that are driven by self-serving reasons (self-oriented life aim), others may still be in a state of drift or disengagement.

It is worth bearing in mind that adolescents can feel a sense of purposefulness without necessarily demonstrating all three dimensions of purpose (*Hill & Burrow, 2021*). This sense of purposefulness may be understood as a “variable state purpose” that arises from engaging in personally meaningful activities. It may develop and become more habitual, ultimately consolidating into a more “enduring trait purpose” (*Hill et al., 2023*). Of course, we may feel a sense of purposefulness across a wide range of activities, from working on a passion project to connecting with loved ones, but they do not all seed further purpose development. A sense of purposefulness that arises from activities that are aligned with what matters to us, however, has the potential to move us closer to purpose.

Purpose has been conceptualised as a developmental asset linked to indicators of flourishing.

Categorising purpose along the three dimensions of intention, engagement, and beyond-the-self orientation can provide us a snapshot of where adolescents are in their purpose development. What proportion of our youths feel a sense of purpose? Are most of them finding that they are making progress? Are our youths dabbling in activities and exploring (perhaps at the state level of purpose)? Are they disengaged? The answers to these questions can help identify areas where additional support may be needed.

Cultivating Purpose: How Contexts Matter

Research has revealed that purpose may be unstable during early adolescence but can strengthen in clarity and commitment as adolescents find opportunities to engage in purposeful pursuits and form aspirations aligned with their purpose later (Malin et al., 2014). Purpose, therefore, is **not merely discovered but must be intentionally cultivated**, through acting on what matters, reflecting on one's values and engaging with the world (Bronk et al., 2024). As a forward-looking construct, purpose provides a self-organising framework through which young people interpret and regulate their experiences by reflecting on their values, strengths, and aspirations, as well as setting goals that connect present actions to future aims. Essentially, purpose development is a process characterised by ongoing, iterative cycles of exploration and consolidation.

However, recent scholarship cautions against treating purpose as something that develops solely through intrapersonal reflection or within immediate interpersonal relationships. Rather, **broader**

contextual conditions shape what young people perceive and envision as meaningful, attainable, and worthy of commitment (Lincoln et al., 2026).

In today's social and developmental landscape, many young people experience purpose less as a settled, long-term commitment and more as a **working orientation that guides choices and provides direction amid uncertainty** (Liang & Klein, 2022), pointing to the need for a more ecologically informed understanding of how sociocultural, economic, technological, and political forces shape the pathways from which purpose develops.

Therefore, educational contexts should support young people in developing their identities, values, and competencies that sustain not just a successful but purposeful life. Some educational institutions have increasingly positioned purpose as a central developmental task. **Service learning, mentoring programmes and co-curricular experiences** are all viewed as important sites in which **purpose can be explored, nurtured and solidified** (Liang & Klein, 2022; Lincoln et al., 2026). As Liang and Klein (2025) remind us: "purpose isn't something people find alone, it's something they **build, with others, over time**".

FUTURE

Supporting Purpose Development

There are emerging accounts of young people learning early in life to pursue purposeful goals only to later encounter environments that subtly undermine the very values they were encouraged to uphold. How can we support youths in the process of purpose development? Table 1 below summarises several key support sources that have been identified across studies (e.g., Lim, 2022; Yu & Deutsch, 2020;

Zhu et al., 2024), including **structural, informational, and emotional support**. For example, Liang and Klein (2025) call for accessible mentorship, advisory programmes and community outreach experiences that are relatable, culturally responsive and capable of engaging young people in developing both self-awareness and a consciousness of the world beyond themselves.

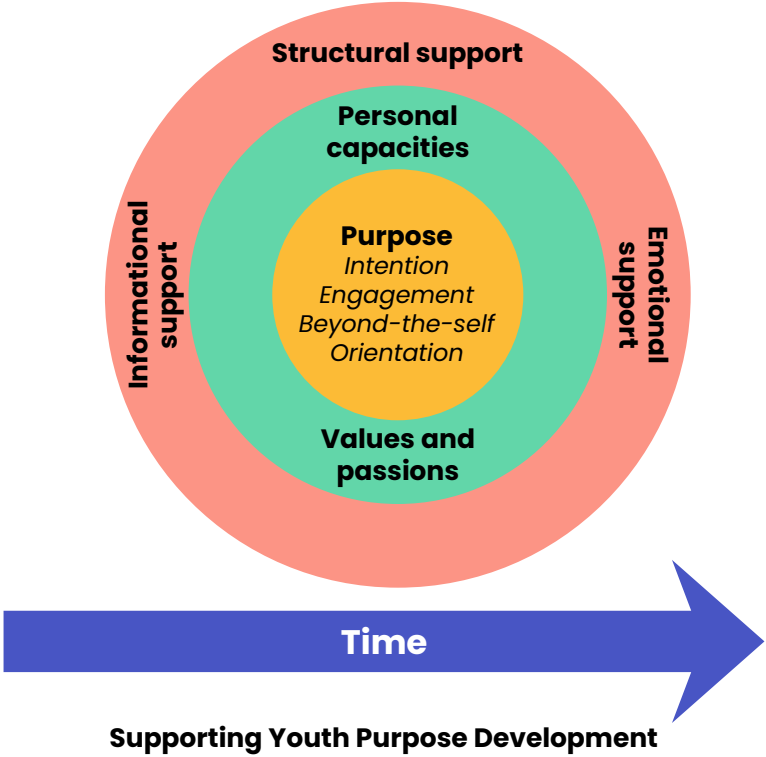
 Structural Support • Provide opportunities for youths to explore and identify their values, interests, passions, and strengths • Create space for youths to reflect on their experiences • Provide opportunities for youths to enact their purpose in meaningful contexts	 Informational Support • Introduce relatable role models or purpose exemplars to broaden youths' visions of possibilities • Offer guidance for youths to turn challenging life events into purpose • Engage in ongoing conversations about how purposes may connect to the world beyond the self • Provide relevant information and guidance to help youths identify the available paths forward in their purposeful pursuits • Connect youths to mentors	 Emotional Support • Affirm youths' purpose intention • Provide encouragement and positive feedback as youths pursue their purpose • Facilitate connections with like-minded peers who provide companionship and emotional support
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Table 1: Key support sources for purpose development

Purpose, Character, and CCE

Purpose embodies the notion of the good. Yet, it is unfortunately conceivable for purposes to be directed toward anti-social ends while being perceived to be contributing beyond the self. Beyond the key support sources stated in Table 1, fostering purpose development cannot neglect the cultivation of personal capacities, including moral identity and character strengths like **agency**, **perseverance**, and **self-regulation** (Han et al., 2019; Linver et al., 2022;

Schwartz et al., 2025). These personal capacities enable the pursuit of purpose, which, in turn strengthens these capacities. Broadly, therefore, character and purpose cannot be separate endeavours, for **character grounds purpose, purpose directs character, character enables purpose, and purpose deepens character**. CCE is the space where character, purpose, and citizenship are cultivated as one.



About the Authors



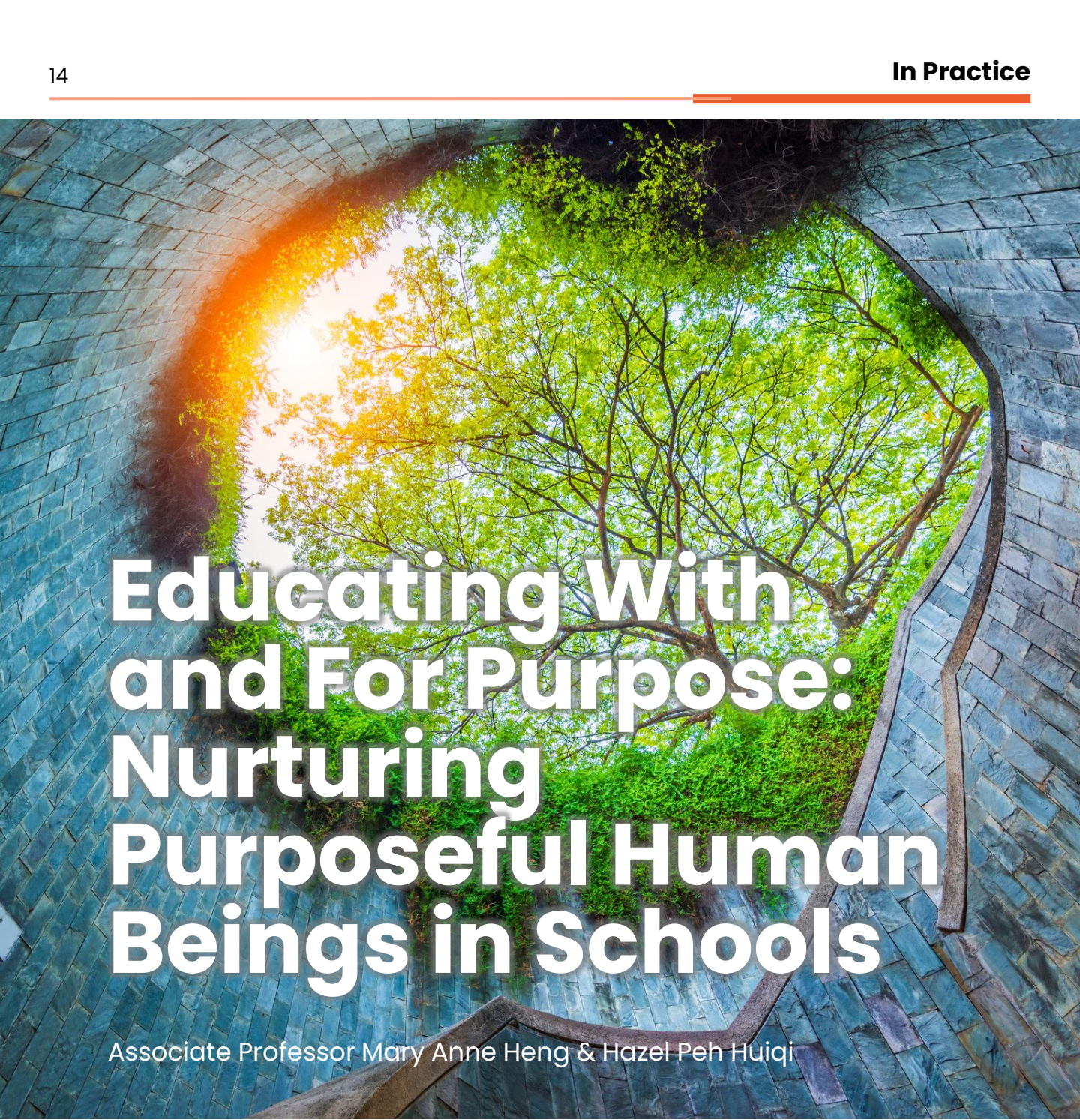
Dr Melvin Chan is a Senior Education Research Scientist at the Singapore Centre for Character and Citizenship Education, NIE, NTU, Singapore.



Dr Lim May Li is a Research Fellow at the Singapore Centre for Character and Citizenship Education, NIE, NTU, Singapore.

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Educating With and For Purpose: Nurturing Purposeful Human Beings in Schools

Associate Professor Mary Anne Heng & Hazel Peh Huiqi

Why Purpose Matters in Schools

Singapore consistently ranks among the world's top education systems in PISA and TIMSS, the product of reforms balancing performance targets with holistic outcomes and diverse education pathways (Kwek, Ho & Wong, 2023). Purpose features centrally in MOE's CCE 2021 curriculum, aimed at developing students' values, character, social-emotional wellbeing and citizenship dispositions (MOE, 2020). As schools continue strengthening holistic education, there is growing interest in how purpose can be understood not only in relation to future aspirations and pathways, but also as a **sustained orientation towards meaningful contribution to others and society**.

As the preceding articles have established, purpose is defined as a long-lasting intention to accomplish something meaningful not only to oneself, but to the world beyond-the-self (Damon, 2008). Yet purpose-oriented education has largely remained within project work and service learning (Malin, 2018), socio-emotional skills (Malin, 2025a, 2025b), and career counselling (Liang & Klein, 2022). While these provide important opportunities for reflection and growth, they cannot substitute for the everyday curriculum and pedagogical experiences through which students make sense of themselves, others, and the world around them. Amid growing concerns internationally about belonging, identity, meaning and wellbeing among young people, schools are increasingly called to do more than prepare capable learners. Schools must also cultivate purposeful human beings.

Drawing on Inspiring Purpose in High-Performance Schooling (Heng, 2024), with Singapore as an example, this article asks: **how might schools, where students spend much of their time, educate for purpose?** It offers principles, pathways, and critical reflections for practitioners.

What Purpose Means for Schools: Principles for Nurturing Purpose

In a similar vein to the dimensions of purpose found in research, as expounded by the preceding article, purpose in education can be said to have three touchstones, the **TAGs: Truth** (being true to oneself), **Aspiration** (reaching towards meaningful, other-oriented goals), and **Goodness** (acting for a greater good beyond the self). These are mutually reinforcing, not sequential. Purpose grounded only in truth becomes self-absorption. Purpose that aspires without goodness becomes ambition without conscience.

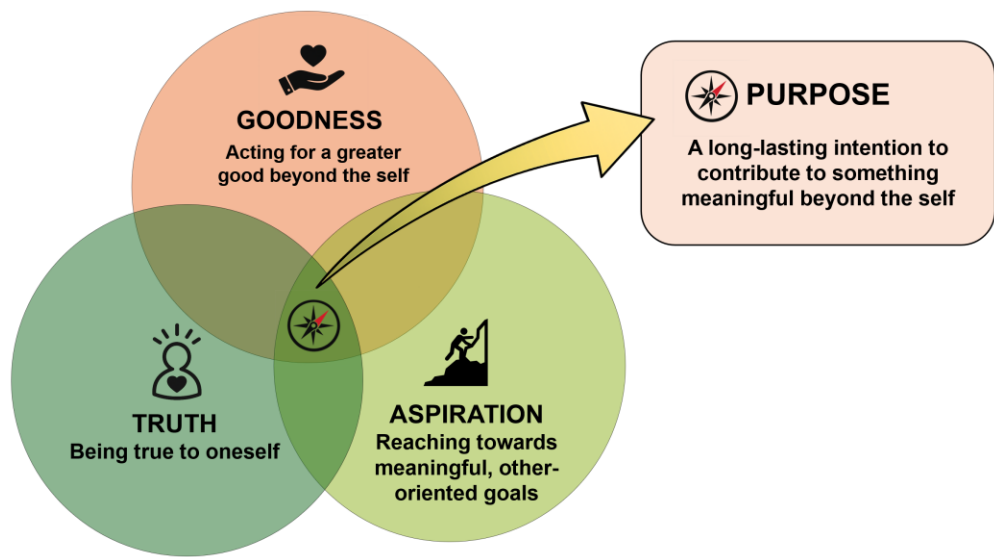


Figure 1: **Nurturing purpose in education**

Note. Adapted from Inspiring Purpose in High-Performance Schooling, by M. A. Heng, 2024, Routledge. Copyright 2024 by Routledge. Adapted with permission.

Begin with the self of the educator.

Be true to yourself. The most overlooked question in schools is not what or how to teach, but who is teaching. **Purpose-driven teaching begins with an inner journey:** the educator's **values, assumptions, and vision** for their students. Schools should encourage teachers to ask: *Who is the self that teaches and learns? Who are my mirrors, those who help me see myself more clearly and honestly?*

Educators who engage honestly with these questions become powerful catalysts for purpose in their students. Professional learning and reflection must create conditions for this inner work, keeping sight of the ethical compass by asking **what we value**, rather than focusing only on what we do and how we do it.

Know the child, truly. Purpose cannot be cultivated through a planned curriculum if students' lived experiences, questions, and how they make sense of the world are not taken seriously. Teachers must move beyond examining the quality of students' work to **uncovering the thinking, motivations, and lived experiences** beneath it.

Teachers who take time to listen and who probe beneath surface-level responses often discover that their assumptions about learners are profoundly mistaken. Knowing the child is the foundation for helping that child discover personal purpose.



Reflection Prompts FOR EDUCATORS



What kind of human beings do I hope my students become?



What does my teaching reveal about what I truly value?



Who and what helps me see myself more clearly and honestly?



How open am I to perspectives that unsettle or stretch me?



How am I living out what I teach? What changes in my teaching (and leading) would have the greatest influence?



Questions that help teachers know the child



What matters to this student?



What motivates or discourages them?



What experiences shape how they see the world?



What strengths or concerns are emerging?



What kinds of persons are they becoming?

Design curriculum as mirror and window. Purpose-driven curriculum invites **students to see themselves in what they learn (mirror)** while also **situating their experiences within a larger human story (window)**. Students should encounter opportunities to connect learning with their own identities, experiences and aspirations, while also examining broader societal and global issues beyond themselves. In this way, the curriculum becomes a **living and world-centred curriculum** (Biesta, 2021; Heng, 2024) – not merely for knowledge acquisition but for meaning-making, self-discovery, and understanding and acting on one's place in the world (OECD, 2025).

In Singapore, Science could foreground socioscientific issues, inviting students to move beyond asking “What is true?” towards questions like “Given what we know, how should we respond?” and “What responsibilities do we have towards others and society?”

In Language and Humanities, critical

social inquiry asks: “Where do I stand, and what will I do?” Such invitational questions go beyond seeking correct answers or simply facilitating discussion. They encourage students to grapple with deeper questions of fairness, responsibility, and possibility in relation to real societal issues.

Co-create an ethos of purpose. Purpose cannot be the concern of one teacher or of CCE alone. It must be embedded in **school culture**, in how leadership speaks about education, in what is celebrated, and in how teachers relate to students within and beyond the classroom.

Caring leaders continually ask: *Why are we doing this? Who are our students becoming?*

Schools that model purpose not merely in mission statements, but in everyday relationships and practices, are schools where students grow into a larger sense of why their learning matters, and how they might contribute meaningfully to others and society.



Image generated on ChatGPT

Where Purpose Efforts Falter

Purpose as intervention, not foundational. Many schools are already providing opportunities for reflection, Values-in-Action projects, and leadership development. Yet purpose cannot remain at the level of discrete programmes or experiences. **Purpose is central to the foundational and living curriculum**, informing how schools define broader notions of success, nurture relationships, and support students in becoming persons who contribute meaningfully beyond themselves. **Purpose is not merely something schools teach**, but something schools collectively model and live out.

This may be reflected in how teachers speak to students about success and failure, the kinds of contribution that are recognised and celebrated during assemblies or classroom interactions, the opportunities students are given to make decisions, lead initiatives, and serve others meaningfully, and the reflective conversations that teachers facilitate about students' values, choices, relationships, and who they are becoming.

A whole-school approach is therefore essential, anchored by the question: *How might we help students make informed decisions and take responsible actions in their everyday lives?*

Purpose without the student's voice. While educators often seek to guide students meaningfully, purpose development can feel inauthentic when adults unintentionally impose their own assumptions, aspirations,

and definitions of success onto students. Genuine purpose development begins with listening deeply to students' experiences and concerns: *What matters to you? What problems do you care about? How could your strengths help address problems you care about?*

Instrumentalising purpose. Purpose education risks becoming instrumental when it is treated primarily as another outcome to be achieved or measured, rather than a **deeply personal and developmental process**. In such contexts, students may experience purpose as something they are expected to display or accomplish, rather than something they are supported to explore and grow into.

Although teachers care deeply about their students, it is equally important that **students experience being genuinely known, supported, and cared for** (Noddings, 2006). Purpose requires a culture that supports **experimenting, risk-taking, and learning from failure**, where students can discover what they love, what they are good at, and what they find genuinely meaningful.

Neglecting the moral dimension. Purpose without ethics risks becoming ambition without conscience. Schools that cultivate personal passion without nurturing an other-oriented commitment may produce motivated individuals who remain disconnected from the needs of the world around them. Purpose education must therefore attend not only to aspiration and achievement, but also to **responsibility, empathy, and care for others**.

Educating With and For Purpose

Across subjects, not only CCE, the curriculum should invite students to **locate themselves within subject matter** and develop a sense of wonder that engages at cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and existential levels (*Schinkel, 2017*). Teaching for purpose means being present to students and inviting them to **explore big ideas, wrestle with meaningful questions, and reflect on human values through their learning**.

This requires both **intellectual attentiveness**, attending closely to what students know, think, and feel in their engagement with subject matter, and **moral attentiveness**, genuine care for who students are and the persons they are becoming (*Hansen, 1999*). Conscience formation begins with attentiveness.

In the age of AI, we need to become more human, and it is in our schools, in the daily encounters between teachers, school leaders and students, that this humanity is nurtured or lost. Teaching, at its best, changes the world.

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About the Authors



A/P Mary Anne Heng is an Associate Professor at the Policy, Curriculum and Leadership Department, NIE, NTU, Singapore.



Hazel Peh is a Teaching Fellow at the Singapore Centre for Character and Citizenship Education, NIE, NTU, Singapore.



Small Conversations, Big Directions: How Everyday Moments Shape Student Purpose

Dr Chan Wai Meng Jeffrey

The preceding articles have established that purpose is more than a grand calling or a fully articulated life goal. It is also more than a programme to be delivered. Purpose develops over time through the **relationships and experiences** that help young people **make sense of who they are, what they value, and how they might contribute beyond themselves.**

Scholars such as Patrick Hill and Anthony Burrow have distinguished between having a defined purpose and feeling purposeful. Evidence suggests that most young people, when asked, are able to share a general sense of direction and meaning in their lives. This more inclusive understanding invites educators to see **purpose not as a rare trait to be discovered, but as a**

developmental asset to be cultivated. In practice, purpose can be found in ordinary commitments: learning well, caring for others, contributing to a class, or pursuing meaningful interests, and is often cultivated through everyday experiences, relationships, and contributions that give young people a sense of direction and meaning. Scholars such as William Damon, Kendall Bronk, and Patrick Hill have emphasised that purpose develops progressively as adolescents explore who they are, what they value, and how they can contribute meaningfully beyond themselves. A growing sense of purpose has also been associated with positive outcomes including resilience, motivation, well-being, identity formation, and future readiness.

Dr Jeffrey Chan, Master Specialist (ECG), proposed the **'3M-to-2M' approach of 'Mirror, Model, and Mentoring'**, as a practical approach to nurturing purpose in students, strengthening their sense of meaning and mattering. **'Mirror'** experiences invite students to reflect on who they are, what matters to them, and who they are becoming. **'Model'** influences expose students to purposeful adults and peers who demonstrate how values, commitment, and future-oriented goals can help individuals navigate challenges meaningfully. **'Mentoring'** relationships provide the encouragement, guidance, and emotional support that help students develop confidence and direction over time. Through these experiences, students cultivate **'meaning'** by connecting learning and life experiences to personally valued goals, and **'mattering'** by contributing to and feeling valued within their communities.

Together, the five interconnected dimensions of mirror, model, mentoring, meaning, and mattering, offer educators an intentional yet practical approach for nurturing purpose through everyday interactions and learning experiences.

Purpose Development in Schools

The above ideas have been explored in recent engagements involving educators from curriculum divisions, schools, and practitioners participating in action research on adolescent purpose development. Conversations centred on how schools can **intentionally curate**

learning environments and experiences that help students connect learning to life, reflect on their strengths and values, and develop meaningful aspirations about their futures.

To support these efforts, the Education and Career Guidance Branch (ECGB) at MOE developed a **Purpose Conversation Card Deck**, comprising the **Purpose Conversation Cards** and the **Purpose Discovery Map**. Designed for use across classroom learning activities, teacher-student engagement, ECG counselling, mentoring, and parent-child conversations, these tools aim to embed purpose development into the everyday interactions across students' different life spaces. Adaptations for upper primary students are also underway, with refinements to ensure the questions are age-appropriate, engaging, and developmentally suitable for classroom and parent-child conversations.



The Purpose Conversation Cards are structured around **four thematic categories of ‘Self’, ‘Life’, ‘World’, and ‘Work’**, each containing seven carefully crafted questions. The **‘Self’** category invites students to explore their personal values, strengths, and identity; the **‘Life’** category encourages reflection on aspirations and relationships; the **‘World’** category broadens students’ perspectives, prompting them to consider potential contributions to society; the **‘Work’** category connects purpose to vocation and contribution. Across all four categories, students are guided to develop self-awareness across three interconnected dimensions: personal qualities, aspirations, and contributions beyond themselves.

Following the card conversations, students are guided to construct a **Purpose Discovery Map** - a visual reflective tool akin to a mind-map, where students place themselves at the centre and draw branches outward across the four categories, using their responses to the card prompts as the basis for each branch. Students are then encouraged to draw meaningful connections across the map, for example, by linking a personal strength to a future career aspiration, or a community concern to a potential purposeful commitment. The map serves as both a reflective artefact and a springboard for ongoing conversations with teachers, ECG counsellors, and parents.



EXPLORING SELF

Who I Am & What I Enjoy

- What topics or activities do you find engaging?
- How would you want others to describe you?



EXPLORING WORLD

How I Can Help Others

- If you could create a new subject to be taught in schools everywhere, what would it be and why?
- If you could make a positive difference in the lives of people you care about (e.g. your friends and your family), what would it be?



EXPLORING LIFE

What Matters & What Gives Meaning To Me

- Think of someone you admire. What is it about their life or actions that inspires you?
- What two things do you think are most important for having a life that is purposeful? Why?

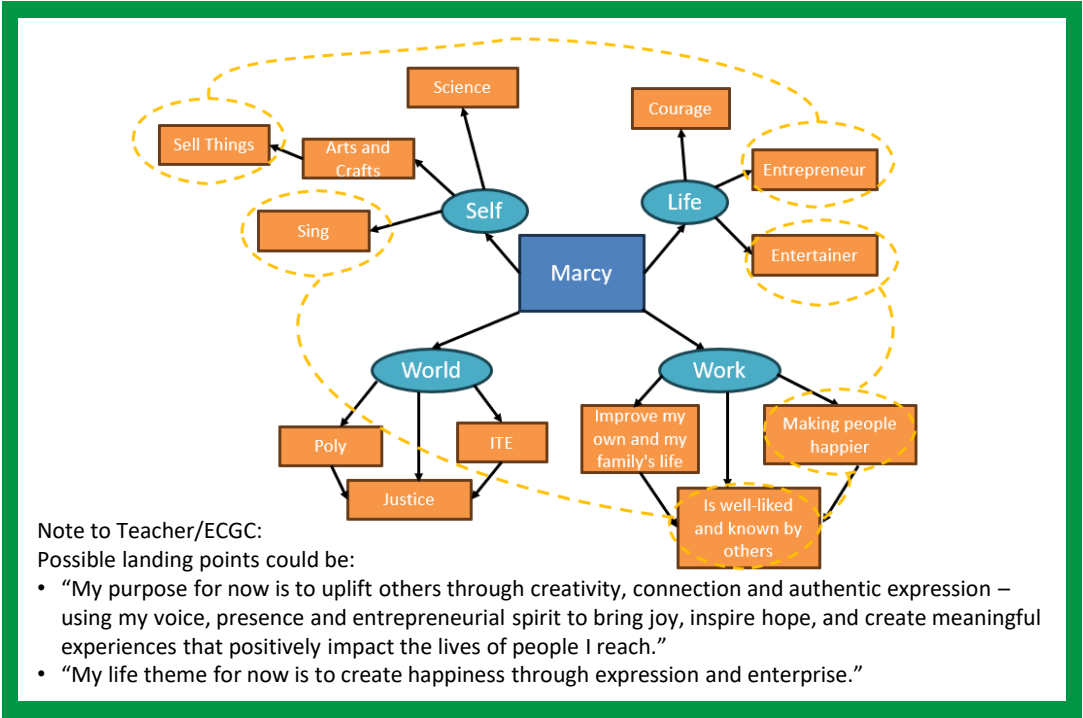


EXPLORING WORK

Things I Like Doing & Skills I May Want To Try

- Think of an adult who enjoys their work. What makes their work purposeful?
- What makes work feel meaningful to you?

Four thematic categories in the Purpose Conversation Cards



Purpose Discovery Map

Purpose Beyond the Classroom

The reach of these tools extends beyond the classroom, as demonstrated by the inaugural ECG@Home Workshop for parents held at a Junior College in May 2026. When parents engage alongside their children in purpose-focused conversations, sharing their own values, life stories, and aspirations, they become more than supporters of their children’s journey. They become everyday role models of purposeful living.

This is perhaps the most important

insight that resources on purpose development offer. Purpose development is not a programme to be delivered, but a culture to be cultivated. It grows through the questions we ask, the stories we share, and the relationships we invest in, in classrooms, counselling rooms, and at the dinner table. When educators, counsellors, and parents work together to create space for reflection and dialogue, young people are better equipped to discover not just what they want to do, but who they are becoming, and why it matters.

About the Author

Dr Chan Wai Meng Jeffrey is a Senior Assistant Director and Master Specialist at the Education and Career Guidance Branch, Ministry of Education, Singapore.



Student's Voice — ECG Branch's research projects (2024–2025)
on Youth Purpose Development, with Upper Secondary and Pre-University students

To truly explore purpose, students need intentional time and space away from the usual rush of the school day. We set aside a dedicated session for our students to engage with the Purpose Conversation Cards, moving away from a traditional, teacher-directed format to allow the students to lead the dialogue. It was incredible to watch them lean into these peer-led conversations about their careers, hopes, and aspirations.

What stood out most was how much they enjoyed simply hearing from one another. Discovering your purpose doesn't have to be a solitary journey; it is often most powerful when navigated alongside friends. The cards provided a safe, structured platform for them to uncover shared values and articulate their futures. By shifting the focus to their own voices, the resource transformed a broad concept like 'purpose' into a meaningful, collective experience.

Ng Sheh Feng

HOD/CCE, Hai Sing Catholic School



During the trial phase of the Purpose Conversation Cards, we observed our Secondary 3 and 4 student-athletes engaging in deeper reflection about who they are becoming, what matters to them, and the kind of lives they hope to lead beyond sport. The prompts encouraged students to take greater ownership of their own stories and make more purposeful choices aligned to their values and aspirations.

Through the Purpose Discovery Map, students also began connecting the dots across sport, academics, and relationships — recognising how strengths such as resilience, discipline, and teamwork could shape multiple areas of their lives and future aspirations. Hearing students express greater clarity and intentionality in their own words was especially encouraging.

What struck me most was how naturally the conversations flowed once students had a structured space to reflect. The cards gave them permission to think beyond their immediate goals and consider the kind of person they wanted to become. Following the successful trial, we trained teachers in the use of these tools and expanded this purpose-driven approach to more levels, including our IBDP student-athletes.

Subramaniyam Jekanathan

Senior ECG Counsellor, Singapore Sports School
*Collaborator of ECG Action Research
on the Purpose Conversation Cards*



During the workshop, parents engaged in role-play activities using the Purpose Conversation Cards to explore how meaningful conversations at home could support their children's growth. The feedback was encouraging — all parents rated the session as useful, and self-rated confidence in engaging their children in purpose-focused conversations improved from 4–6 out of 10 before the workshop to 7–9 out of 10 after.

What the workshop reinforced for me is that parents are not just supporters of their children's purpose journey — they are everyday role models. When parents share their own life stories, values, and aspirations, they give their children a living example of what purposeful living looks like. The Purpose Conversation Cards help open that door, making it easier for families to have the kinds of reflective conversations about identity, values, and meaningful futures that might not otherwise happen naturally at home.

Vina Sim

Lead ECG Counsellor, MOE
Facilitator of parent engagement session at ECG@Home



Small Conversations, Big Directions

How everyday interactions nurture youth purpose

Purpose does not always begin as a grand calling or a fully formed life goal. For many adolescents, it begins more quietly.



1 How Purpose Begins



1. Reflecting on what matters



2. Recognising a strength



3. Connecting learning to life



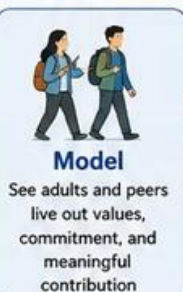
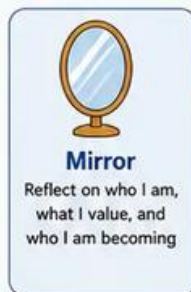
4. Seeing adults model commitment and contribution



5. Being asked, listened to, and guided

Purpose develops progressively as young people explore identity, values, aspirations, and contribution beyond themselves.

2 A Practical 3M-to-2M Frame



3 Tools That Support the Conversation

At MOE's Education and Career Guidance (ECG) Branch, Singapore, we developed the Purpose Conversation Cards and Purpose Discovery Map to support purpose-focused conversations across classrooms, counselling, mentoring, and parent-child engagement.



Self
strengths, values, identity



Life
aspirations, relationships



World
social concerns, contribution



Work
future pathways, vocation

Purpose Discovery Map



4 The Bigger Insight



“ Purpose development is not just a programme to be delivered. It is a culture to be cultivated. ”

It grows through the questions we ask, the stories we share, and the relationships we invest in — in classrooms, counselling rooms, mentoring spaces, and around the dinner table.



5 Why It Matters



When educators, counsellors, mentors, and parents create space for reflection and dialogue, young people are better supported to discover not only what they want to do, but who they are becoming — and why it matters.



Partner with us

If you are keen to help students gain exposure and provide insights on purposeful work, connect here:

<https://lnkd.in/gwkWxEMS>





The Why, What and How of Purpose

An interview with
Professor Kendall Cotton Bronk

Professor Kendall Cotton Bronk is the Principal Investigator for the Adolescent Moral Development Lab and a Professor of Psychology in the Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences at the Claremont Graduate University. She has been studying and supporting positive youth development and young people's purposes in life for almost two decades.

In this interview, Professor Bronk shares her insights on the concept of purpose and how educators can support children and youth to lead a purposeful life.



<https://for.edu.sg/kendall-purpose>

**Scan or click on the QR
code to view a video
snippet of the interview**

What is the concept of purpose and how does it differ from other concepts such as meaning and goals?

When we think about purpose, to put it most simply, it's just the way that we want to leave our mark, the way that we want to contribute to the broader world. From an academic perspective, the definition we use is **"a stable and enduring commitment to using your special skills and talents to make a difference in the broader world, a difference that matters to you"**.

There are three aspects of that definition. First, it is **goal-oriented**. While a purpose is not usually fully achievable, it is something towards which you can make progress. Second, it is **personally significant**. A purpose should really matter to the individual such that it is not something he or she just dreams about. It is something that inspires the person to take action, to dedicate time, effort and personal resources to make progress towards it. Third, a purpose is one that enables the individual to **make a contribution to the world beyond the self**. It is not just about personal growth or things that are more self-focused.

What distinguishes purpose from goals is that purpose is a far horizon aim that gives your life a sense of direction. Goals are generally finite and fully achievable. You have this goal of graduating from college. You have this goal of becoming a teacher. Those are goals that you can check off and at some point, you're done with them. **A purpose is**

a goal that is usually not fully achievable but is an aim towards which you can make progress.

The **beyond-the-self component of purpose is what helps differentiate it from meaning**. Meaning is this broader category of things that matter to us. They might make our lives feel coherent or significant. Purpose encompasses a smaller portion of those things that give our lives meaning and are inspired by a desire to make a difference in the world beyond the self.

Why is purpose so critical to youth development?

We have been really interested in that. One of the things that we know is that leading a life of purpose is associated with all kinds of indicators of **psychological health** – hope, positive affect, life satisfaction, compassion and gratitude.

It is even associated with **physical health** indicators, such as better cardiovascular health and lower rates of chronic pain, better sleep, and longevity. And of course, it links to all kinds of **academic and professional indicators of success**.

Young people with purpose are better equipped to bounce back from life's inevitable hardships. They tend to have **more resilience and grit**, and are more likely to stay **engaged**.



How is purpose related to character and citizenship education?

Purpose gives our lives a direction. People can find purpose in doing altruistic, pro-social, and socially beneficial things. Those aims can be really productive, but they do not have to be. We can look in the broader world and see many examples of, unfortunately, really antisocial or destructive purposes, and self-oriented aims.

This is where character comes in. **Character helps shape the direction and quality of purpose.** For this reason, I think of **character and purpose as almost two sides of the same coin.**

How can we develop a positive sense of purpose in our youth?

We can think of purpose development in four aspects – self-discovery, identifying strengths, cultivating social responsibility and making an enduring commitment.

We **help young people connect with their values** – *What is it that they care about? What matters to them?* We also help them **identify and**

develop their strengths – *What are they particularly good at? Where do they really excel?* Then, we **cultivate a sense of social responsibility** – *What are the issues in the broader world that concern them and that they want to help address?* And from there, we help them **make a future commitment to take action.**

There are some concrete activities that we have seen that can be effective. One of these is service learning, where young people **get out into the community and engage in contribution.** These activities give young people the opportunity to **live out beyond-the-self contribution.** We think it is particularly effective when young people are encouraged to **reflect on the experience** as just engaging in the community may not always lead to purpose development.

Purpose-enabling schools support students to go out, try something, and reflect. After students reflect on what felt meaningful and aligned to their personal values, what allowed them to use their skills and strengths to make a difference that was really meaningful to them, they are supported to **refine their plans and commitment, and try again.**



Character helps shape the direction and quality of purpose. For this reason, I think of character and purpose as almost two sides of the same coin.

What about children? What can we do to set the ground for meaningful purpose exploration when they are older?

We do not expect children at the primary school level to be living full lives of purpose – it just does not seem developmentally appropriate. However, we know from our research that many exemplars of youth purpose draw from their experiences in those earlier years. Hence, we think about the **experiences, capacities and relationships** that young people build in their primary school years as potentially being the **antecedents to purpose development**.

I think, in particular, there are at least three dispositions that we want to think about building in the primary school years. The first is **a sense of agency**. We want children to recognise that they can take action, that their interests matter, and that we want to hear their voice. This builds their confidence to take action towards a purposeful interest in the future. The second is **a sense of belonging and psychological safety** in school. If not, they are not going to

find opportunities there to really cultivate purpose. The third is **a disposition towards contributing**. There are lots of opportunities for children to contribute to their family, peer groups, classrooms, and communities. They should be thinking about giving back, they are capable of giving back, and maybe even, they enjoy and find meaning in giving back.

Beyond these three dispositions, **a love for learning** and **curiosity** are also important. When we did a study looking at the connection between character strengths and purpose among adults, we were surprised that one of the key strengths was a love for learning. So I think this curiosity about the world and the needs in the world could be a fourth disposition that we want to consider as well. We want children to ask big questions and to be engaged in the world around them.



What do teachers need to develop in order to support students in cultivating their purpose?

Educators play a really key role in helping students cultivate their own purpose. But **purpose is not something that we can just deliver pedagogically** – we cannot just take students through the steps as we might to solve a math problem. It is something that educators need to really **embody** and **model** for their students. Educators who model purpose for students can be very inspiring.

When educators are **willing to share with their students why they became teachers and the kind of purpose they find in educating young people**, that gives young people this first-hand model of what purpose looks like. And it is an attainable, relevant, close-at-hand, and maybe even a little bit imperfect model of purpose that gives the young people permission to start thinking about this for their own lives.

Before educators can be effective purpose guides or supports, they have to **spend some time reflecting on their own purpose**. When they are better connected with that, they can be important models and sounding boards for young people who are working on their own purpose development.

You have studied purpose across different cultures and countries. What are some differences that stood out to you across these different contexts?

I love studying purpose across different cultural contexts. I think it is a great opportunity to see what we all share. There are a lot of universal elements in terms of what people need to feel that what they are doing matters. We all want to leave our mark. **I have yet to find a culture where this does not seem to be the case.**

One of the things that I have noticed about the culture in Singapore is that you have more of a communalistic, collectivist culture while we have a remarkably individualistic culture in the US. When we are working to cultivate purpose among young people in the US, we just focus on what is meaningful to them. But young people in Singapore are very much embedded in their families and communities, and so there is a bit more negotiation that needs to go on as they think about their purpose in relation to what their parents really want for them.

Purpose is not just focused on the “what” you do, but it is the “why” you do it. Parents may have an idea of the “what” they want for their child. If we can **push the young people to think about their “why”**, I think there is an opportunity for them to find purposeful activities, careers and endeavours that work well for both themselves and their sense of responsibility to their family. This is an extra step in the purpose development process in a more collectivist culture like Singapore.

What are some areas that you think research can further explore?

I think there are at least two areas that are really ripe. One is that, historically, an awful lot of the research has come from the West. I think that it will be interesting to see **purpose research in new cultural contexts** and find out the different flavours of purpose that emerge from these different places. The concept of purpose is becoming more global in terms of research as well as practice. I am really excited to learn how it differs in different cultural contexts and what remains the same.

The second area is going to be **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**. We are just beginning to scratch the surface of how AI is going to shape education. The question is how AI is going to support or impede purpose development. I think there are probably examples of both, and I look forward to seeing how it all plays out.

What are some examples of how AI has been used to support purpose development in students?

I know there are some programmes in the US that are **using AI to scaffold deeper reflection**. We find that students can do some of that reflection on their own, but they really do benefit from having somebody help them go a little deeper. Ideally, we would have students engage with another person, which will help build a sense of connection. But we also have to be realistic. Teachers have many students and limited time. So maybe there is an opportunity for AI to help support that reflective conversation with students.

Another thing I have seen is **the use of AI to help young people map their character strengths, values, and the ways they want to make a difference and find coherence**. Also, with AI, learning can be tailored to the individual and can be done much more efficiently. This may help condense the time taken for learning so that the rest of the school day can be used to explore things such as purpose and character development.

In each of these approaches, there are real potential risks as well. **If AI is being overly directive and takes away the autonomy of students, it defeats the whole purpose**. Also, the inequitable access to AI tools is potentially problematic. We have to keep both the risks and possibilities in mind, but I am cautiously optimistic.





The Place of Purpose in Social-Emotional and Character Education

An interview with
Professor Maurice Elias

Professor Maurice Elias is a Professor of Psychology at Rutgers University in New Jersey, as well as Director of the Rutgers Social-Emotional Learning Lab, and Academic Director of The Collaborative Center for Community-Based Research and Service at Rutgers.

Professor Elias began his career in clinical psychology, working with children and adolescents. Through this work, he started thinking about how the problems faced by his clients could have been mitigated.

He then shifted from treatment to prevention, and focused on **what could be done in schools to help children learn and thrive.**

Ideas about what supports children's development have evolved over the years. Professor Elias and his colleagues initially focused on how behaviour, cognition and emotions of children promoted social competence. As the concept of emotional intelligence gained wider attention in the 1990s, researchers and educators increasingly adapted related ideas for school contexts, contributing to the development of social-emotional learning.



Professor Elias continued to build on the concept of social-emotional learning, and established **the need to anchor social-emotional skills in character to provide a positive direction for the use of these skills**. This formed the area of social-emotional and character development (SECD). At the same time, he emphasised the importance of a **sense of purpose** which helps children understand the aspirational aim they are working towards. Most recently, Professor Elias and his colleagues are looking into **matter**ing – the school being a place where students feel welcomed, valued, and able to contribute.



Professor Elias highlights that purpose development is a **communal process**. He suggests that schools can provide students with **opportunities to work together with their peers, parents, teachers and the community to explore, articulate, and clarify their purpose**. Purpose development is a journey that evolves over time. The key is to keep the concept of purpose real, tangible and salient for students, and support them through this journey.



Scan or click on the QR code to find out more about Professor Elias' insights about purpose



An Institute of

