'MPower Shows Me Who I Want to Be': A Qualitative Study of a Youth Purpose Program

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Abstract: Studies have documented widespread academic disengagement in middle and high school students. This disengagement has been tied to a myriad of negative outcomes, including failure to graduate from high school and transition into college and meaningful vocations. Supporting adolescents in cultivating a sense of beyond-the-self purpose is one factor that may combat student disengagement. MPower is a program designed to cultivate beyond-the-self purpose in an effort to promote student engagement and completion of high school (Klein et al., 2019). In a recent quantitative study, MPower participants compared to controls demonstrated a higher GPA, BTS purpose, self-efficacy, and decreased performance approach and performance avoidance goal orientations. In the current qualitative descriptive study, 11th and 12th grade (N=25) students in the Northeastern region of the United States, described their experiences in the MPower program. Three themes associated with the transformative aspects of MPower emerged from focus group data: 1) practice in strategic goal planning, 2) engagement in mentoring relationships, and 3) increased social support within a community. Because fostering youth purpose engenders many promotive and protective factors, these findings hold important implications for implementing similar programs more widely.

Keywords: *Adolescents, goal setting, MPower, social support, youth purpose.*

Introduction

Active engagement in high school can positively shape a young person's vocational path for years to come. Benefits of high school engagement include increased completion of high school (Finn, 2006), improved grades, and greater aspirations for higher education (Wang & Holcombe, 2010) and job attainment (Carnevale et al., 2015). In contrast, student disengagement is associated with student dropout, delinquency (Wang & Fredricks, 2014) and increased health problems (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). Fortunately, student engagement is a malleable construct that, when promoted, has been shown to decrease school dropout and promote graduation (Christenson et al., 2008). Research shows that student engagement is significantly impacted by the degree to which adolescents: believe that school is important to achieving their goals (Lovelace et al., 2018); have meaningful relationships with school staff (Wang & Eccles, 2012); and engage in social interaction with peers (Wang et al., 2019). Thus, programs that aim to positively impact these factors, in turn, increase student engagement.

Youth Beyond-the-Self Purpose

Youth beyond-the-self (BTS) purpose has been associated with increased school engagement. Developing such purpose (i.e., "a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self") is a central task of adolescent identity formation (Blattner et al., 2013; Damon et al., 2003,

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p.121). Adolescents with a sense of BTS purpose display greater academic engagement (Liang et al., 2016, 2017), life satisfaction (Bronk et al., 2009), and psychological well-being (Brassai et al., 2015). Unfortunately, only 20% of adolescents demonstrate a clear sense of BTS purpose (Damon, 2009). Moreover, the process of searching for purpose can be stressful and isolating (Blattner et al., 2013; Keyes, 2011).

Given its many positive correlations, researchers have emphasized the importance of cultivating BTS purpose in young people. Yet, little published work exists on interventions explicitly designed to cultivate youth purpose (Klein et al., 2019). An exception is MPower--a program designed to increase student engagement, intrinsic goals motivation, and college matriculation rates at an urban high school via the implementation of youth BTS purpose curriculum. Klein et al. (2019) provide an in-depth description of the program's elements and the curriculum's empirical and theoretical foundations. Additionally, in a recent quantitative study, MPower participants compared to controls demonstrated a higher GPA, BTS purpose, self-efficacy, and decreased performance approach and performance avoidance goal orientations (Sepulveda et al., 2020).

In short, MPower is a classroom-based, year-long curriculum provided weekly during approximately 50-minute blocks, to high school students through a mentoring relationship (i.e., school counselor) and supportive peer community (i.e., co-participants) (Klein et al., 2019). MPower reflects key influences on the development of purpose, called the 4 P's of purpose: 1) *people* who provide the necessary support; 2) *passion* or youths' long-standing interests; 3) *propensity* or youths' skills and strengths related to their purpose, and 4) *prosocial benefits* or an intention to contribute to others beyond the youth (Liang et al., 2016, 2017). That is, the program works through key *people* or relationships who help youth identify and cultivate their *passion, propensity*, and desired *prosocial benefits* as these relate to youths' long-term aspirations.

Previous studies have suggested that these combined factors influence adolescents' perceptions of their capabilities and motivate them to pursue purpose. The MPower curriculum was also designed to be as collaborative and experiential as possible (e.g., frequent group activities). And MPower students were required to meet one-on-one with their mentor figure outside of the class block. The content of the lessons focused on specific skill building, including strategic goal planning, as well as broader skills such as enabling students, many of whom were from marginalized backgrounds, to reframe their narratives by identifying their strengths and resources as these relate to the pursuit of purposeful goals (Klein et al., 2019).

Current Study

While previous studies (Klein et al. 2019; Sepulveda et al., 2020) support the value and impact of MPower, the current study seeks to examine the mechanisms of MPower's impact. The current study uses a qualitative methodology to examine the experiences of MPower participants throughout their development of youth purpose. Specifically, program participants were queried in focus groups about the impact of the program on them. We expected to learn from participants' responses whether the program fostered youth purpose, and what elements of the program contributed to doing so.

Methodology

Participants

The MPower program was given to a subset of 11th and 12th grade students (N=94, control N=42, 61.7% female) from a U.S. public high school in the northeast region on the United States. They were randomly assigned to the program (i.e., MPower) and control group (i.e., academic enrichment/study hall class). The students in the control group were given an alternative curriculum that focused on increasing academic engagement (e.g., time management, study habits, etc.).

The current study involves a smaller subset of students who participated in the MPower program (N=24). Fifteen students self-identified as female and nine students self-identified as male. The diverse sample included self-identified White/Euro-American (n= 8, 87.5% female), African-American/Black (n= 5, 40% female), Latino or Hispanic (n= 4, 25% female), and Asian-American (n= 6, 66.7% female) participants.

These are students in the district's only public high school (N= 986, 51% youth of Color, 52% cisgender girls, 22% sexual minorities, 41% free/reduced-price lunch status), and reflect some of the diversity of their semi-urban community.

Procedures

Prior to the implementation of the MPower program, the university Institutional Review Board and the principal of the high school approved the study, including the focus group aspect, which is the subject of this paper. Student participants received a co-signed letter announcing the study from the principal and research team, and parents received forms for informed passive consent with the option to refuse participation. To deny consent for their child, parents were asked to return the signed letter, email a school administrator, or email a member of the research team. The focus group aspect of the study was described to MPower students, and if they wished to participate, they provided informed assent, and were placed in one of three focus groups (N=8, N=8, N=8) --one for each of the three MPower class sections. Students who declined to participate in the focus group were not barred from participation in MPower. Focus groups, facilitated by one trained research assistant (RA) each, who were not a part of the program implementation, lasted 43, 41, and 52 minutes,

respectively. Focus groups were conducted at Time 2, after a semester of program implementation. All three facilitators were psychology graduate students (one self-identified as an African-American woman, and two as White women). Semi-structured group interviews were conducted to explore students' experiences in MPower and whether and how these experiences contributed to forming their sense of purpose. The definition of purpose was reviewed at the start of the focus groups (i.e., "Purpose is a personally meaningful long-term aspiration that you are actively engaged in pursuing, and that is motivated by the desire to contribute to others' lives") (Damon et al., 2003, p. 121). Focus group interview questions focused on whether and how MPower helped form their purpose, and included eight open-ended questions and eight targeted questions (e.g., "What do you like/not like about MPower?" and "What is the most helpful part of MPower?"). These group interventions were audio recorded and transcribed by other RAs.

Reflexivity

When conducting qualitative research, it is important to identify researchers' biases and values that may inform the results (Krefting, 1991). Two principal investigators of this study have expertise in positive youth development and are faculty members in psychology programs with commitments to understanding the experiences of underrepresented youth. All graduate students involved in this study were supervised by one of these PIs and have interests in positive youth development and purpose. We acknowledge that our interest and expertise in purpose development and youth mentoring may inform our findings.

Analysis

A qualitative descriptive analysis was used for this study to attain rich, straightforward descriptions of the data (Sandelowski, 2000). Specifically, researchers utilized directed content analysis that involves a deductive coding process paired with theoretically-driven codes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This method was used to acknowledge, incorporate, and extend theory regarding purpose development interventions.

Researchers first immersed themselves in data by reading the focus group transcripts multiple times (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Next, researchers utilized the 4 P's framework (Liang et al., 2017) to create a preliminary codebook and then the team open-coded the first focus group transcript. In developing the initial codebook, the RAs came to consensus on code names, definitions, and exemplary quotes. The codebook remained open to adaptation as the final two transcripts were analyzed and researchers continuously returned to preceding transcripts in order to apply changes made in the codebook. In order to ensure trustworthiness of the process and code consensus, the RAs continued to work together in coding all three transcripts (Saldaña, 2011). The final 29 codes were organized into 5 categories: Program Participants' Key Takeaways, Purpose Components, Mentor's Impact, Components of Class, and Program Participant Recommendations for Improving MPower. Each category included 4-9 specific codes (e.g., stress reduction, purpose uncertainty, affirmation support, value of teamwork/solidarity) with definitions and exemplar quotations. When fully coded, the transcripts were sent to an auditor who was not involved in the coding process. The researchers met and incorporated the auditor's comments. Finally, applied codes were compared across the 3 focus groups and those codes that appeared frequently and consistently across the three focus groups were identified and clustered into central themes with exemplary quotes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes were refined in a recursive process in which the researchers considered the data set as a whole. Examples of specific codes within the Strategic Goal Setting theme included: goal planning and achievement, stress reduction, purpose formation, self-efficacy; within the Mentoring Relationship theme: perception of instructor as genuine, provision of affirmation support, self-discovery, and one-on-one meeting; within the Social Support theme: value of teamwork/solidarity, self-discovery, perspective taking, stress reduction.

Results

Based on the analysis of the qualitative focus group data, three prominent themes emerged: assistance in setting strategic goals for an uncertain future, support within a valued mentoring relationship, and social support within their MPower community.

Table 1. Central Themes

Theme	Exemplary Quotation
Strategic Goal Setting	"[MPower] hasn't said, like, what exactly that path is but like all the steps that I need to take to go on that path...it really teaches you the importance of always having that in the back of your mind and what will truly make you happy."
Mentoring Relationship	"If I have anxiety about college or the future he always makes it a lot better. He helps you get to a solution or at least somewhat close to a solution which is what I like a lot. Sometimes I don't know the answer and he may not know it but he'll kinda direct me to find an answer, which is what I like."
Social Support	"You come back to class and realize everyone is in the same exact state that you're in. Everyone's thinking about the same things so, you know like, it's not just you. Like, everyone's just as lost as you are ya know?"

Strategic Goals

Students described MPower as helpful in planning for an uncertain future. They noted the scaffolding that MPower provided to reflect on and develop long-term goals. Celeste remarked, "I feel like [MPower] is… about finding out about yourself, using your traits to keep yourself motivated and opportunities and ambition and what you want out of life. It's basically sort of disguised under general senior pressures but it's like a relief class, kind of." Others spoke of the motivation and stress relief they derived from this focus on long-term goal planning. Curtis noted, "I'm kinda like nervous cause I don't really know what's gonna happen and stuff so MPower really helps with that." Another student, Greer, provided more insight on how MPower reduces stress: "[it] teaches you the importance of always having that in the back of your mind and what will truly make you happy. So like when you do make that choice you make the right choice, you know? Like not necessarily deciding your future right now but when you are like about to decide, like knowing what to do." MPower participants described feeling relieved of the pressure to make the "right" choice, and instead clarified their core values so they could continuously head in a *direction* aligned with these values. Similarly, Tyree shared, "I don't think it's necessarily figuring out what job you want to do. I feel like it's important to establish what values you have. I feel like this is a good class to establish the person you are...or the person you want to become."

Along with considering their long-term aspirations, many students described how the MPower curriculum and mentor guided them in developing and executing subgoals. Lelah explained how MPower helped them derive meaning in day-to-day responsibilities, "I think it's a program set up for us to be able to learn the steps in achieving the main goal we have in our lives. That's pretty much what I got out of it, like walk to school like, the important things you have to go through in order to reach it, like you don't just reach your goal, you have multiple steps you have to go!" Maritza described how they will use this model moving forward, "It's just a way to teach us how to get started with life, basically. How to plan your future 'cause like I said I learned about what I want to do for my future or how to plan my future with MPower...Without it I'd be so far behind right now." Brendon explained the method they were taught in MPower, "whenever I have college meetings [MPower mentor] will help me do action steps and kinda map out which way things will go if I do this and if I do that and I feel like that is just really helpful." Others described the usefulness of the subgoal framework relative to other types of support they had received: "With the meetings with [MPower mentor] I feel like he makes it easier to understand how to get to your goals where like when you're doing it with your guidance counselor they'll just be like you should just get good grades and just try and apply yourself. Where [MPower mentor] will be like 'yeah you need to focus on this and this step.' He makes it easier to understand how to reach your goal." Reena provided this key takeaway for many students: "[MPower] hasn't said what exactly that path is but like all the steps that I need to take to go on that path." In other words, MPower does not force students to commit to one path but instead gives them the tools to find the best direction for them and guides them in the day-to-day pursuit of goals related to this direction.

Mentoring Relationship

Students described their relationships with the MPower mentor as a source of affirmation, comfort in the face of stress, and guidance without explicit directives. First, they noted the importance of their mentor's willingness to spend one-on-one time with them focused on their future goals: "after I met him I would go to him for lunch sometimes and we would just talk and he would initiate and so like we're gonna start at the essay and he would sit down with me." Asa noted, "I think he tries to incorporate [our goals and dreams] into the one-on-one meetings. Like he remembers it from each person and then talks about our purpose and our goals and stuff." Respondents agreed that their mentor carved out time for both impromptu, as well as scheduled, weekly one-on-one meetings.

They also highlighted ways that the mentor helped them work through challenges in pursuing their purpose without imposing his opinion or giving orders. Instead, they described how he guided them in searching for their own answers: "[My mentor] kind of like guides where your motivation should go and like it helps you work towards that [purpose]." Jay explained, "he helps you get to a solution or at least somewhat close to a solution which is what I like a lot. Sometimes I don't know the answer and he may not know it but he'll kinda direct me to find an answer, which is what I like." Alma further elucidated the open-ended and repetitive questions their mentor utilized in guiding students: "we do an activity, come back here, and then like discuss what's our purpose? What's the meaning of purpose? And then like what's our

purpose?" Derrick recalled their mentor's response to a student changing their plans: "He was really happy cause someone ended up changing their goal cause it wasn't working out and he was just like that's exactly what I want you to do--know what the right steps are and figure out what's going to work out for you." Janessa agreed that seeing the mentor's unconditional support for their peer emboldened them to explore their own purposes without fear of judgement should they make a "wrong turn." Overall, students deeply valued both the individual time their mentor devoted to them as well as efforts to use these meetings to cultivate a deeper understanding of purpose for both mentor and mentee.

Finally, respondents noted the MPower mentor's affirmation and emotional support as comforting amidst the stress of searching for purpose. They characterized their mentor relationship as unique from other relationships: "Just being able to be on that first name basis with someone. Just someone you feel completely comfortable with it's just sorta having that de-stressor in your life"; "any time I see him he kind of makes [my concerns] easier", and "usually nobody really asks me about that and they're not willing to help me with it as much as he did. Like obviously my parents but it was different from having a member of the faculty do that."

Peer Social Support

Students described the development of an authentic community within MPower. They shared that these genuine connections served to normalize their experiences of confusion and stress while searching for purpose. They placed great value on forming community and contrasted this experience with that of other contexts in their lives.

Respondents explained how the class was explicitly structured to foster a sense of community: "It's very engaging, we're not just sitting there like listening to someone talk, we're usually put into groups and we're doing like group activities and actually collaborating with each other" and "each [student] will check on one another, like how are you doing your homework, how are you doing this? So, like it was a good thing to keep everyone in check to do what they have to do." This accountability to the group fostered connections within MPower classes.

In turn, students developed meaningful relationships with one another. Winnie shared, "it's kind of like a community, like MPower makes you feel, not like special but...I feel like everyone in MPower is a little, like, they have a better sense of community." Several students felt validated and supported unconditionally by their peers: "it doesn't feel like if you mess up somehow that people will make fun of you or otherwise shame you for it. Like if you change your goal, no one's gonna get mad at you, you did what you needed to do, no one's gonna judge you...there's no wrong way to do it. It's good. It's all good... [there is] no negative reactions to change"; "You realize everyone is in the same exact state that you're in... everyone's thinking about the same things so you know it's not just you. Like everyone's just as lost as you are ya know?" and "Yeah, It's comfort."

Throughout the group interviews, students shared the meaning they gleaned from this community, including general life preparation ("[we] have a better sense of like, community because of it... that's going to be important in college"), and need for others' help ("It's like [MPower is] trying to show us that sometimes you need other people in order to achieve a goal that you can't always depend on yourself, that it's okay to ask for some help").

Discussion

While existing research has provided strong evidence of the importance of youth purpose, its transforming influence remains vaguely understood. The current study is one of the first to provide insight into what enables purpose programs to be especially beneficial for adolescents. Three major themes emerged from the data to reveal factors that played a role in cultivating purpose: strategic goal setting, forming meaningful mentoring relationships with a trusted adult, and peer support.

Goal-setting literature suggests that setting and pursuing clearly defined goals is a useful strategy for youth in managing the uncertainty about future prospects. Such goals provide direction and motivation to persist on tasks that might otherwise feel futile and arduous. A meta-analysis of 35 years of goal-setting research reports that setting specific, challenging goals, much like those set in the MPower program, increased performance on both academic and occupational tasks (Locke & Latham, 2002). Developing long-term goals helped students remain engaged in their short-term responsibilities. Moreover, when individuals held a complex understanding of their reasons behind pursuing a goal, they reported greater motivation to achieve (Davis et al., 2016). This suggests that goals that are forced on students, rather than self-selected, may be pursued less vigorously. MPower participants discussed similar results, stating that their overall and purpose-specific motivation increased when setting specific, self-selected goals. Additionally, research related to goal-based curriculum has indicated that overarching goals can become more achievable when broken down into well-defined, incremental steps (i.e., subgoals) (Huang et al., 2017). MPower participants indicated that they learned the value of subgoals, noting that setting subgoals helped them maintain motivation for their purpose goals. This supports the idea that subgoals are especially useful in clarifying the path between the beginning and completion of a larger goal in situations marked by high uncertainty (Amir & Ariely, 2008). Heath et al., (1999) reported that subgoals act as small signals of progress, and individuals who set subgoals were more sensitive to their progress throughout the goal pursuit process. Furthermore, subgoal structures were useful for maintaining motivation for overarching goals because they enhance goal attainability. It can be challenging for students to feel motivated to begin pursuing long-term goals. This phenomenon,

called the starting problem, is due to the significant temporal distance between their current position and goal completion (Heath et al., 1999). Notably, Huang et al. (2017) found that the effect of subgoals on enhancing motivation may be especially salient in combating the starting problem during the early stages of goal pursuit. MPower participants affirmed that identifying and pursuing subgoals allowed them to progress in their college and career preparations. Uniquely, students found that MPower allowed them to see that all actions that move them towards their purpose are inherently subgoals (e.g., completing homework is a subgoal of graduating).

Goal setting and pursuit are positively related to several outcomes, including academic achievement (Bowman et al., 2019; Morisano et al., 2010) and improved global well-being (Massey et al., 2008). Additionally, goal pursuit has served as a protective factor against depression (Massey et al., 2008) and delinquency (Carroll et al., 2013). Results from the MPower students suggest that a potential pathway from goal-setting to improved global well-being was mediated by stress relief. MPower helped students identify and name a significant source of stress in their life: the uncertainty of their role in the future. They felt pressure to make the "correct" career decision (one that would benefit them financially and socially), a decision that loomed large in their minds. MPower shifted their thinking to reduce this stress. Students discovered their core values and learned to create a vision of the future that aligned with those values. In ideating purpose and career goals with core values in mind, students felt more personally connected to their goals and experienced less stress. Moreover, students emphasized how knowledge of their values would be useful in setting future goals and evaluating future career options, which reduced overall stress over uncertain futures.

Participants highlighted the importance of their mentor's willingness to spend focused one-on-one time with them exploring their purposes and aspirations. They reported that this fostered a closeness in their mentoring relationships, which has been shown to be more beneficial to youth than the frequency or duration of contact (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Furthermore, research suggests that high quality mentoring relationships are critical in fostering youth purpose (Blattner et al., 2013; Liang et al., 2017) and are also associated with an enhanced sense of prosocial orientation, mastery, and positive community attitudes (Schwartz et al., 2013). Consequently, MPower participants highlighted the support from their mentor in working through challenges of or barriers to purpose, while encouraging them to make their own decisions. In turn, youth described feeling a sense of agency in decision-making as their mentor guided them toward their own answers. Liang et al. (2008) described that fostering autonomy and empowerment in this manner becomes an increasingly valued mentor attribute for older adolescent mentees.

Lastly, students voiced that their mentor's affirmation and emotional support were comforting amidst the stress of searching for purpose. This aligns with research that suggests that mentors, especially those characterized by a high level of attunement, strong emotional connection, and authenticity (Liang et al., 2013) serve as buffers to psychological stress in adolescents (Gutowski et al., 2018), and that positive outcomes result from mentoring youth with empathy and engagement (Rhodes et al., 2006). Improved self-esteem, academics, prosocial behaviors, and reduced misconduct (Chan et al., 2013), as well as gains in social self-efficacy and a greater sense of community (Chapman et al., 2017) are some of the many impactful positive outcomes that have been associated with strong mentoring relationships during adolescence.

Study participants emphasized the positive impact that the peer support within their MPower classes had on their purpose development. Supportive peer relationships have been shown to be increasingly impactful during adolescence (Bokhorst et al., 2010; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Liang et al., 2010), are correlated with positive school outcomes (Rosenfeld et al., 2000), and enhanced physical and mental health as a function of reduced stress and a stronger sense of purpose in life (Cohen, 2004; Scales et al., 2006). MPower participants emphasized the value of the experiential and collaborative nature of the curriculum resulting from consistently working together in groups to achieve common goals. Participants also highlighted a structure of peer-accountability, in which they regularly checked-in with one another regarding their progress on different assignments as well as to share reflections on their purpose journey progress. Research shows that a sense of solidarity with and obligation to their peers is a key source of motivation for youth in following through on their commitments (Salusky et al., 2014). Which, in turn, enables them to develop their sense of responsibility, a key skill for success in adulthood (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2009). Moreover, students relayed that these community-based activities were implemented in the context of non-judgmental acceptance. Considering that searching for purpose increases adolescents' vulnerability to experiencing self-consciousness and unstable self-esteem (Blattner et al., 2013), it is unsurprising that they value the peer acceptance they experienced within MPower. In fact, students reported that these activities and group norms allowed authentic connections to develop and cohesive communities to form within each MPower class. Notably, purposeful communities of this nature have been associated with an increased sense of belonging (Liang & Ketcham, 2017). Peer social acceptance is correlated with increased prosociality, decreased aggression (Asher & McDonald, 2009), and improved academic achievement (Wentzel et al., 2020). Students described valuing their MPower communities highly as sources of stress reduction and as meaningful examples of the power of human connection.

Conclusion

This study provides insight into the aspects of a program that participants find especially beneficial for the development of their purpose. The three characteristics they emphasized were strategic goal setting, mentoring relationships, and peer support. MPower enabled participants to learn how to use subgoals, which increased their motivation to pursue long-term, purposeful goals. This evidence builds upon previous goal-setting research, which found that subgoals were particularly helpful in uncertain situations (Amir & Ariely, 2008). Notably, this study adds to the literature that some students may be able to see all actions that move towards their long-term goal as subgoals, allowing them to feel more continuously motivated. Moreover, mentors clearly foster empowerment and serve as buffers to psychological stress (Gutowski et al., 2018; Liang et al., 2008), while preserving student agency by not imposing their own ideas.

Finally, students in the focus groups emphasized MPower's culture of non-judgmental acceptance and peer-accountability. Students felt safe to express and explore their purpose ideas and, in turn, checked-in regularly with other students about progress towards purpose related goals. The study results build on previous research that found that solidarity with peers can act as a source of motivation for young people (Salusky et al., 2014). The students further clarified that social support in MPower was a source of stress reduction and provided meaningful examples of the power of connection.

Recommendations

Findings from this study should inform the development of other youth purpose programs. In particular, future programs would do well to incorporate: (a) allocated time and curriculum to intentionally set strategic goals, (b) a dual model of group meeting and individual meetings with mentors, and (c) peer support. Future purpose development programs should seek to integrate and emphasize the program elements described above.

Specifically, strategic goal setting should include teaching students how to set subgoals, which help students maintain motivation for long-term goals. Future programs should also incorporate a mentoring component. One-on-one meetings may be particularly useful in helping students create and achieve specific subgoals that serve as next steps on their purpose journeys. Additionally, peer support should be integrated into all class sessions. Many students found comfort in knowing their peers were experiencing similar stressors to their own. Thus, mentors should facilitate discussions and utilize community building exercises to foster such student cohesion. Additionally, mentors should foster group accountability by encouraging group check-ins regarding progress toward goals. Finally, students noted that the community building skills acquired in MPower would be useful post-high-school.

It is also recommended that future research explore the generalizability of this study's results by implementing these recommendations into similar programs in a diversity of high schools. Additionally, a longitudinal study assessing the impact of MPower on purpose development over time would be informative. Finally, implementing programs similar to MPower at different developmental ages (e.g., first or last year of college) may better elucidate best practices in cultivating purpose at different developmental timepoints.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. Its sample was racially diverse, but included students from just one high school that sources students from one town. Additionally, the qualitative data was collected solely via group interviews. Conducting individual interviews, prompting individual open responses, or collecting class observation might have supplemented or deepened the findings. Despite these limitations, this study is one of the few to evaluate a program aimed at cultivating purpose in adolescents. Moreover, the ethnic/racial diversity of the sample, and representativeness of this sample in the larger school community provide some support of the generalizability of findings to similar populations.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Lincoln: Analysis/interpretation, drafting manuscript, critical revision of manuscript, final approval. Wood: Analysis/interpretation, drafting manuscript, final approval. Reed: Analysis/interpretation, drafting manuscript, final approval. Sepulveda: Concept and design, data acquisition, supervision, final approval. Liang: Concept and design, critical revision of manuscript, final approval. Hill: Concept and design, securing funding, administration, final approval. Perella: Concept and design, securing funding, administration, final approval.

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