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Purposeful Explorers: Adolescents Finding Their Purposes in a Catholic High School

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Contemporary research about purpose suggests that adolescents benefit in multiple ways when they develop purpose, and at the same time, that many adolescents are not purposeful. Adolescents in Catholic high schools may receive a unique set of contextual supports that help them develop a sense of purpose and understand what that purpose is. This study was designed to understand the content and organization of purpose for young adolescents during their first year in a Catholic high school. The sample included 153 ninth grade students from a Catholic high school in the United States (M age at T1 = 14.02 years; 51% male; 39.2% White). Participants responded to open-ended prompts on a survey at the beginning and end of the academic year. Open-ended responses were qualitatively coded, and descriptive and chi-square analyses were used to look for unique distributions of purpose organization. Most adolescents named one or two content categories of purpose, and most adolescents demonstrated stability or became more organized about the content of their purposes. Results are discussed in terms of their developmental significance and their utility for researchers and practitioners, particularly in the Catholic school setting.

Keywords

adolescence, purpose, positive youth development, high schools

A growing amount of research about purpose in life among American teenagers suggests that while many adolescents have a sense that their lives have purpose, the majority do not know the content of their purposes, or are not engaged in action to accomplish their purposes (Malin, Reilly, Quinn, & Moran, 2014). In a contemporary wave of developmental research, *purpose in life* has been defined as a long-term intention to accomplish something that is at once personally meaningful and of consequence to the world beyond the self (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). In other words, purpose may be thought of as a way of enacting one's growing understanding of the self in relationship with others. For adolescents in the United States, schools

are a primary context for relationships from which they may develop a sense of how their own gifts and talents can contribute to the lives of others. For this reason, schools are worth further investigation as potentially rich contexts for the development of purpose. Furthermore, given the diversity of schools in the United States, the overall study of schools and adolescent purpose development must include information about adolescents attending various types of schools. With this in mind, the study described here was designed to understand purpose development among adolescents attending a Lasallian Catholic high school characterized by relationships.

Purpose

Many researchers who study adolescent purpose have converged around the multidimensional definition of the construct introduced by Damon et al. (2003). The dimensions of the Damon et al. (2003) definition include a personally meaningful *intention*, action to accomplish that intention (*engagement*), and a *beyond-the-self* orientation to the intention. The discovery of a personally meaningful intention is particularly relevant to thinking about early indicators of purpose. The intention of one's purpose is an aim to which all other goals and related actions are subordinate (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Much existing research about purpose has prioritized the primary intention (e.g., Moran, 2009).

One finding that has emerged from research based in this multi-dimensional understanding of purpose is that the beyond-the-self dimension proves challenging to find and maintain for many individuals throughout adolescence. Malin et al. (2014) found that during the transition between early and later adolescence, individuals who became less purposeful did so, in part, because they lost the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose. A further analysis of transitions in and out of the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose in comparison to the other dimensions also revealed that gaining the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose was an atypical adolescent experience (Quinn, 2016). These findings have particular relevance for thinking about purpose development within the context of Catholic schools, where efforts to develop students into persons who use their gifts and talents to serve others is central to the educational mission.

Thinking about purpose as multidimensional affords practitioners and researchers ways to recognize and support early indicators of purpose. Researchers have used the dimensions of purpose to identify precursor forms of purpose, or indicators of the presence of one or two dimensions of purpose,

even if all dimensions are not present (e.g., Moran, 2009; Malin, et al., 2014). In these studies researchers have worked to first identify the primary intention of the adolescent's purpose, and then determined the form of purpose by classifying the individual based on whether or not he or she is engaged in activities to accomplish that intention and on whether or not the intention is of consequence to the world beyond the self (e.g., Moran, 2009; Malin, et al., 2014).

When researchers start with the dimension of intention in their efforts to identify purpose, they allow room to recognize steps on the path to purpose in adolescents who have discovered a primary intention. However, finding a personally meaningful intention is a key step in developing purpose, a step that involves recognizing that one's life has a purpose worth discovering, and that may involve the exploration of many different possibilities for the future. More information is needed about what it may mean to be purposeful *before* the discovery of a primary intention for one's purpose, and about the characteristics of contexts that may be particularly supportive in this stage of purpose development.

Catholic High Schools in the United States

Within the broader landscape of schools in the United States, Catholic schools are particularly well suited to helping adolescents develop a sense of purpose, because they hold great potential for the cultivation of relationship building as both the key experience and outcome of Catholic schools (Cook & Simonds, 2013). In fact, one of the most seminal works about the effects of Catholic schooling the United states names *relational trust* as the defining feature of these schools (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). More contemporarily, Cook and Simonds (2013) proposed a framework for a shared charism for 21st century Catholic schools in which they suggest that the goal of Catholic schools is to help students build relationships with self, God, others, communities, and all of creation during their school years, so that Catholic school graduates may be individuals who continue to build positive relationships in the world. Both in terms of what has been recognized about them, and in terms of their own aspirations, Catholic schools may be thought of as fundamentally relational.

Cook and Simonds (2013) employ *charism* to describe the unique spirit, inward qualities, and outward focus of Catholic schools run by various religious orders (e.g., Jesuit, Franciscan, Lasallian, Sacred Heart). The broad range of charisms represented in the contemporary Catholic school landscape

include a focus on relationship building. It is simply impossible to exclude the importance of relationships from schools based on faith in a triune, relational God who, above all else, encourages individuals to love God and their neighbors as themselves (Cook & Simonds, 2013).

A brief overview of the charism of Lasallian Catholic schools, the context within which I conducted this study, illustrates this point. Lasallian schools are run by the De La Salle Christian Brothers, an order of men in the Catholic Church who take vows to live in community and dedicate themselves to educating the young, especially the poor (Christian Brothers Conference, 2017). Guided by the spirit of the community of Brothers, Lasallian schools in the United States today are primarily led and staffed by lay people.

Lasallian Catholic education is rooted in relationships. In Lasallian schools, this relational focus is communicated through the Five Core Principles of Lasallian Education: faith in the presence of God, concern for the poor and social justice, quality education, respect for all persons, and inclusive community (San Francisco New Orleans District, 2017). Four of the five are relational without further explanation, and the description of *quality education* communicates the fundamentally relational understanding of this principle; a quality education is defined as that which "prepares students not only to contribute to society but to transform it. It calls all to use their knowledge and talents to critically examine and engage the world in light of the message of the Gospel" (San Francisco New Orleans District, 2017, para. 3). The implication of these principles is that the whole purpose of education is about developing individuals who are relational with others in a spirit of service.

Curriculum offers another clue about the primacy of relationship in the Catholic school. Research about curriculum in Catholic schools has been relatively scarce over the past two decades in the United States, and the market culture in which Catholic schools exist creates some tension between Catholic identity and more market-aligned priorities (Garcia-Huidoboro, 2017). However, one of the themes reflected in the scholarly conversations that have occurred is that Catholic high school curriculum is distinguished, in part, by the presence of religious education. For students in some Catholic schools, their study of religious education begins with an effort to understand the self in relationship to God and others. At the time of the study reported here, for example, the textbook utilized in the first year religious studies course at the school in which this study took place began with a chapter entitled, "Identity and Development: Becoming Who You are Called to Be" (Zanzig & Allaire, 1996/2005). Among other topics, the chapter includes discussions about the

relational nature of humans as made in God's image and about the ways in which individual gifts and talents may be discerned and used in the world.

Finally, Catholicism includes the language of *vocation*. The belief that each individual is called to serve God in a particular way is at the heart of a Catholic understanding of vocation. While instruction around vocation in Catholic schools often starts with this broad understanding of vocation, it also often narrows down to thinking of vocation in three possible categories: consecrated life, married life, or single life. Whether or not this is a pedagogically and developmentally appropriate way to approach the topic of vocation with adolescents is a debate outside of the scope of this study. However, the fact that vocation is even introduced in the typical Catholic high school is another way in which these schools may be particularly supportive of the development of purpose. This is because both vocation and purpose share conceptual underpinnings – that each individual has gifts and talents, and that the existence of these gifts and talents is a call to action – to be of consequence to the world beyond the self.

The Catholic School as Ideological, Social, and Spiritual Context for Purpose Development

Positive youth development (PYD) researchers focus on the strengths of youth and the capacity of all young people to make positive contributions to society (Damon, 2004a), with special attention to interactions between individuals their contexts (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). In the field of positive youth development (PYD), growing attention has been given to the roles of religion and spirituality in adolescent development. Particularly relevant to the study described here is theoretical work which proposes that religion may serve as an ideological, social, and spiritual context for development (King, 2003). In this work, King proposes that religions provide ideological contexts for adolescents through religious beliefs, worldviews, and values. This ideological context, she proposes, interacts with the developing formal operational skills of adolescents in unique ways that are particularly suited to adolescent developmental tasks, like purpose development. King also suggests that religions provide social contexts through spiritual modeling, service, and leadership opportunities, through which adolescents are able to consider and try out several different ways of being themselves in the world. Finally, King proposes that religions offer spiritual contexts for youth development. The spiritual context, she argues, holds potential for the adolescent to "experience a profound sense of connectedness with either a supernatural or human other

that invokes a sense of awareness of self in relation to other" (King, 2003, p. 201). An adolescent immersed in this sort of spiritual context may be more likely than one who is not to develop a sense of purpose, which includes an understanding of self in relation to other.

The Developmental Period of Adolescence

Adolescence is a period of time that begins with the onset of puberty and ends with the assumption of stable adult roles in society (Blakemore & Mills, 2014; Damon, 2004b). Given that this period of time may be quite long in contemporary society in the United States, most researchers divide adolescence into early adolescence (about ages 10 – 14) and late adolescence (about ages 14 – 18), with a recognition that these are somewhat culturally constructed developmental periods (Arnett, 2013; McDevitt & Ormrod, 2016). Two characteristics of this developmental period make it a particularly rich time in the lifespan to study the development of purpose – its exploratory nature, and the developing future-oriented, cognitive capacities of adolescents.

First, many have theorized that adolescence is the beginning of a particularly exploratory time in the lifespan trajectory. Erikson proposed that the key developmental task of adolescence is to answer the question, "Who am I?" (1968), which requires some degree of exploration so that the individual avoids role confusion. Marcia (1966) extended Erikson's theory of identity development to describe four different identity statuses into which the individual's search for identity may be categorized. One of these, *moratorium*, is specifically defined by active exploration, without having committed to various identity dimensions. While Marcia did not describe moratorium as the ideal status for individuals, a period of active exploration without making commitments may be developmentally expected during the adolescent years. In studies utilizing Marcia's framework, moratorium has been seen more often in adolescents and emerging adults than at other age periods, even though at any one time point, more adolescents fall into the more committed statuses of *foreclosure* and *achievement* (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010).

More contemporarily, researchers within the field of positive youth development have used the language of *sparks* to describe the interests, passions, skills, or talents that may light a fire in the young person's life (Benson, 2008; Benson & Scales, 2009). Pursuing these sparks may lead to purpose in life (Benson, 2008; Benson & Scales, 2009), but unlike purpose, there is no expectation that the adolescent narrow down to just one spark. By using the language of *sparks,* positive youth development researchers acknowledge that

part of the adolescent experience may involve a time of multiple and changing intentions, and that forces outside of the adolescent play a role in determining whether or not these sparks catch fire.

Second, adolescents engage in more and longer-term future-oriented thinking than younger children, and they undergo cognitive changes that may further enable this type of thinking. One way of describing what individuals imagine for their future is found in the language of *possible selves* proposed first by Markus and Nurius (1986), and later included in a review research focused on many different ways of describing the broader category of possible identities (Oyserman & James, 2011). Markus and Nurius's (1986) conception of possible selves, however, is particularly helpful for thinking about adolescent purpose development. Possible selves represent how individuals think about their futures, and may include both hoped for versions and feared versions of the future self. Furthermore, Markus and Nurius suggest that possible selves provide a link between self-concept and motivation, propelling individuals to move beyond who they are and into who they want to be. As adolescents imagine future possibilities, these possible selves may combine that which they find personally meaningful with that which may influence the world in some way, propelling action to link the actual self with this ideal, future, and purposeful self. Additionally, research has consistently shown that during adolescence, families and peers influence the content of possible identities, and that these identities often align with broader cultural norms about the typical age related tasks of adolescence through emerging adulthood– e.g., further education, career, and family goals (Nurmi, 1991; Oyserman & James, 2011).

While Markus and Nurius's (1986) proposal did not focus exclusively on adolescents, adolescence may mark a particularly salient time in the significance of possible selves because of growing adolescent planning abilities. Research related to goal attainment processes has consistently shown that planning to achieve goals increases across the adolescent years (Massey, Gebhardt, & Garneski, 2008; Nurmi, 1991;). This increase in planning skills is likely helpful in the development of purpose, which can be understood as a higher order goal to which several smaller goals are subordinate (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Not only do adolescents plan more than younger children, they also undergo actual changes at the level of the brain related to their abilities to think about, imagine, and plan for their futures (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). Adolescence, therefore, is a time when individuals are able to bring more refined skills to future planning and pursuing a number

of possible selves. This means that adolescence may be a time when individuals are more likely to move from having a general sense of having purpose, to knowing what that purpose is and how to accomplish it.

The Present Study

As presented, in some contemporary, interview-based research about adolescent purpose, purpose classification begins with the researcher's decision about whether or not the adolescent describes a primary, personally meaningful intention when asked about his or her important values and goals (see Malin, et al., 2014 for a description of this coding system). In this approach, the researcher does not directly ask the participant to describe his or her purpose, at least, not in the beginning of the interview. This indirect approach has significant methodological advantages. One of the most important advantages to this approach is that it lessens the risk of the adolescent providing a false, yet favorable, answer to the question, "What is your purpose in life?" in order to please the interviewer. Another advantage is that one can be more certain that what the researcher identifies as *purpose* in one adolescent is based on a definition of purpose consistently used by the researcher across adolescents.

However, there are empirical reasons to believe that a more direct approach to asking adolescents about their purposes in life would also yield beneficial information. Hill, Burrow, O'Dell, and Thornton (2010) have shown that when adolescents are asked to define purpose, they do so in ways that are quite similar to the multi-dimensional way of thinking about purpose currently found in the research literature. This provides support for the validity of adolescent answers to the questions, "Do you have a purpose in life?" and "What you think your purpose in life is?" Adolescents' answers to direct questions about their purpose in life, then, may provide information about purpose development prior to the identification of a primary and stable intention. Practitioners and researchers can learn from the ways in which adolescents answer these direct questions about purpose.

With this thinking in mind, the goals of the present study were (a) to uncover the ways in which younger adolescents attending a Catholic high school described their purposes when directly prompted, and (b) to investigate the degree to which their descriptions of purpose did or did not become more ordered and focused around a primary intention over the course of an academic year.

Methods

The study reported here was part of a larger longitudinal investigation of purpose among ninth grade students attending a Catholic high school (Quinn, 2017). The present analyses drew from survey responses collected from these ninth graders near the beginning and end of their first year of high school (approximately 6 months apart). The analytical plan included qualitative coding of open-ended responses and descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. As this was an exploratory study designed to understand the content and organization of purpose among adolescents attending a Catholic high school, there were no hypotheses.

Participants

I recruited participants from a Lasallian, Catholic high school in the Western United States. As a particular expression of the Lasalian, Catholic identity of the school presented earlier, the school mission included explicit attention to faith, global citizenship, leadership, service, and college success. Recruitment occurred through visits to required classes. Participants' parents provided written consent, and students assented online before they completed the survey. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Stanford University approved the original study and the IRB at Texas Christian University approved the use of the existing data for the analyses reported here.

Freshman class enrollment at the time of the study was 257 students. The Time 1 sample included 208 students (46.2% female; 38% White; M age at T1= 14.02 years, SD = .46). Overall, 73.6% (n = 153) of the original 208 participants provided open-ended responses to the question about their purpose in life at both Time 1 and Time 2, and were retained. The retained sample was similar to the full T1 sample in most respects (See Table 1). Forty-nine percent of the retained sample was female, and the majority reported that their mothers had completed college (71.2%, n = 109). The retained sample included 60 individuals who self-identified only as "White" (39.2% of the retained sample), with an additional 31.4% (n = 48) identifying across multiple race and/or ethnic categories. The next largest racial and/or ethnic category of participants was "Hispanic/Latino(a)" (15.7%, n = 24). Smaller numbers of participants (n < 8 in each category) identified as only African American, Asian American, Filipino, or "other."

Table 1
Sample Characteristics (N=257)

	T1 Participants	Retained T2 Participants [a]	% Retained from T1
	208 (80.9% of class)	153 (59.5% of class)	71.6
	n (%)	n (%)	
Female	96 (46.2)	75 (49.0)	78.1
Male	112 (53.8)	78 (51.0)	69.6
African American	8 (3.8)	8 (5.2)	100.0
Asian American	8 (3.8)	5 (3.3)	62.5
Filipino	5 (2.4)	4 (2.6)	80.0
Hispanic or Latino(a)	35 (16.8)	24 (15.7)	68.6
Multiple Races/ Ethnicities	66 (31.7)	48 (31.4)	72.7
Other	6 (2.9)	4 (2.6)	66.7
White	79 (38.0)	60 (39.2)	75.9
Mother completed college	149 (71.6)	109 (71.2)	73.2
Mother did not complete college	45 (21.6)	34 (22.2)	75.6
Student did not know mother's education level	14 (6.7)	10 (6.5)	71.4

[a] Participants who responded to open-ended "purpose" prompt at both time points.

Measures

The survey included prompts that allowed for open-ended responses. Participants completed the survey during class time at a computer lab in their school through the Qualtrics online survey platform. After initial recruitment visits, I visited each school twice, once at the beginning of the school year, and once near the end (approximately six months apart), to facilitate the survey. Participants listened to a uniform set of instructions and were able to ask clarifying questions.

Open ended prompts. In order to obtain participants' thoughts about their own purposes in life, the survey included a question asking participants if they thought they had a purpose in life. Only 1 individual said "no" to this question at Time 1, and this individual did not take the survey at Time 2. Then, all participants who responded "yes" or "maybe" typed responses to the following prompt in 3–5 sentences: "Please describe your purpose in life (or what you think it may be)."

Coding Scheme for Open-Ended Responses

Some researchers studying adolescent purpose have utilized 17 categories of purpose, either in qualitative coding or in survey questions, to capture the general content area of the individual's purpose intention (Bundick et al., 2008; Bronk & Finch, 2010; Malin et al., 2014; Moran, Bundick, Malin, & Reilly, 2013). These categories include the following: help others, serve God/a higher power, make the world a better place, change the way people think, create something new, make things more beautiful, fulfill my obligations, do the right thing, live life to the fullest, make money, discover new things about the world, earn the respect of others, support my family and friends, serve my country, have fun, be successful, and have a good career. The coding scheme for the open-ended responses was based in these categories of purpose. Table 2 shows examples of statements that corresponded to each of the categories.

Two coders, blind to the goals of the study, worked with the data. They learned the coding categories using pilot data prior to beginning work with the study dataset. Each response could receive multiple, binary category codes indicating the presence or absence of the category in the response. With the two coders, I checked the reliability of the coding scheme through a process of coder calibration. Initially, the two coders coded 28 responses and obtained a Cohen's Kappa of at least .70 for the following codes: *help others* (.892), *make things beautiful* (100% agreement, no cases), *live life to the fullest* (.771), *make money* (rare, 100% agreement, no cases), *work in a good career* (.841) (See Table 2). We met to discuss each code for which coders obtained an initial Cohen's Kappa lower than .70, making changes to the category descriptions as necessary. Once this was completed, the coders coded another 28 responses, and obtained a Cohen's Kappa greater than .70 for the following binary codes: *serve God* (.937), *make the world a better place* (.856), *create something new* (.782), and *serve my country* (.781) (See Table 2).

Table 2

Categories of Purpose: Coding Calibration and Descriptive Results

Code	Explanation or Example Text from Participant Responses	Kappa	T1 n (%)	T2 n (%)
Help Others	"From what I think, it may be to help people who are sick or hurt."	.892	84 (54.9)	87 (56.86)
Serve God	"I am meant to be happy and do everything for the Lord."	.937	33 (21.57)	30 (19.61)
Make the World a Better Place	"I think I live because we were put in this world to make it a better place than it already is."	.856	19 (12.42)	14 (9.15)
Create Something New	"I think my purpose is…to be the best at making and inventing new and innovative things."	.782	8 (5.23)	4 (2.61)
Live Life to the Fullest	"I should also live a fun and fulfilling life."	.771	17 (11.11)	19 (12.42)
Make Money	"My purpose in life might be to get a job and to make money to support a family cause you have to have money also to support yourself."	*	1 (0.65)	1 (0.65)
Support My Family and Friends	"I also think my purpose in life is to be successful and love and support my family when I am older."	.699	30 (19.61)	30 (19.61)
Serve My Country	"To get a job as an adult and help out the government by paying taxes while still helping the less fortunate by donating things I no longer need."	.781	2 (1.31)	2 (1.31)
Have Fun	"I want to help others and have fun. Being nice is fun."	.783	12 (7.84)	10 (6.54)

Table 2 (Cont.)

Code	Explanation or Example Text from Participant Responses	Kappa	T1 n (%)	T2 n (%)
Be Successful	"For example my purpose in life is to become a successful dentist and to be proud of who I am and to try hard to achieve this goal."	.804	51 (33.33)	32 (20.92)
Work in a Good Career	"My purpose is to be a lawyer or a doctor."	.841	44 (28.76)	41 (26.80)
"Other"	All responses where some intention of purpose was indicated, but where the intention did not code into one of the eleven categories for which coders obtained acceptable agreement		17 (11.11)	24 (15.69)
Sense of Purpose, No Category	All responses where the individual described having purpose, but did not include specific references to the intention(s) of that purpose		4 (2.61)	7 (4.58)

Note. n = 153

After several rounds of discussion, we were unable to obtain Cohen's Kappa at levels greater than .70 for the following codes: *change the way people think*, *fulfill my obligations*, *do the right thing*, *discover new things*, *earn the respect of others*, and *support my family and friends*. Most of these codes rarely occurred in the dataset. However, *support my family and friends* did frequently occur in the dataset, and coders obtained a Cohen's kappa score of .699 for this code. While it did not quite rise above the .70 standard, I retained this code for analyses due to the frequency of its assignment. Given the rarity of their occurrence, I dropped the other codes that fell below the .70 standard from these analyses. After we calibrated coding in this way, the two coders came to agreement on any responses that they coded differently in the coding check process, and then each coder assigned codes to half of the remaining responses. The code for *make things beautiful* did not occur in the full dataset, and therefore was not retained. Coders rarely assigned *make money* in the full dataset, and therefore, the coders met to come to agreement about each

response to which they assigned this code. By the end of the coding calibration process, I retained 11 of 17 possible categories of purpose for analyses (See Table 2).

Analytical Plan

In order to answer my question about the content of participants' purposes, I calculated descriptive statistics about the categories present in each response at Time 1 and Time 2. In order to begin to understand the degree to which participants' purposes became more or less organized over the course of the academic year, I performed chi square analyses to determine whether or not the distributions of the types of movement seen between Time 1 and Time 2 were significantly different from an equal distribution across the possible types of movement. Specifically, I assigned nominal variables to cases for the following types of movement: *no movement*, when the same number of categories were present in T1 and T2 responses, with at least one shared category between the two; *more organized*, when fewer categories were present at T2 than at T1, with the T2 response including at least one repeated category from T1; *less organized*, when more categories were present at T2 than at T1, with the T2 response including at least one repeated category from T1; and *different categories*, when entirely different categories were present at T1 and T2. Additionally, because I dropped some categories during coding calibration, I assigned an additional code to cases that included non-retained categories, because this obscured an accurate understanding of the type of movement between Time 1 and Time 2 in these cases.

Results

The results of this study include descriptive data about the content and number of categories of purpose found in participant responses and findings related to the focus and organization of participants' descriptions of their purposes.

Content of Participants' Purposes from Open-Ended Responses

Across the sample, participants described their purposes in ways that included the 11 categories of purpose retained for these analyses, as well as in ways that were collapsed into the previously discussed *other* category (Table 2). The *other* category included 11.11% of participants at T1 (*n* = 17), and 15.69% of responses at T2 (*n* = 24). Additionally, a small number of participants wrote about having purpose, but did not yet know the content of that

purpose (2.61% of participants at T1, *n* = 4; 4.58% of participants at T2, *n* = 7*)*. Among participants who included descriptions of the content of their purposes, some categories of purpose were more frequently identified than others. Here, I highlight those categories indicated by 20% or more of participants; full results are displayed in Table 2. The most commonly recognized category of purpose in participant responses was *help others*, with a majority of participants showing evidence of this category at both points in time (54.9% of T1 participants, *n* = 84; 56.86% of T2 participants, *n* = 87). The next most common categories of purpose were *be successful* (33.33% of T1 participants, *n* = 51; 20.92% of T2 participants, *n* = 32), *work in a good career* (28.76% of T1 participants, *n* = 44; 26.8% of T2 participants, *n* = 41), and *serve God* (21.57% of T1 participants, *n* = 33). All other categories of purpose occurred in less than 20% of the open-ended responses within a time point.

Number and Organization of Purpose Categories in Participants' Open-Ended Responses

Over the course of the study, the majority of participants described their purposes in focused and increasingly organized ways. The number of categories of purpose recognized in each response was relatively low (Time 1, *M* = 2.08, *SD* = 1.04; Time 2, *M* = 1.92, *SD* = .97). At Time 1, the most common number of categories of purpose was two (*n* = 57; 37.25%), followed by one (*n* = 45, 29.41%), and then by three (*n* = 31; 20.26%). The distribution at Time 2 was similar, with 65 responses (42.48%) containing two categories, 45 responses (29.41%) containing one category, and 26 responses (16.99%) containing three categories. Additionally, changes in the number of categories coded in the responses at each time point demonstrated stability or movement towards one category of purpose, more than patterns of disorganization (See Table 3).

Table 3

Changes in the Number of Categories Between Time 1 and Time 2

	n (%)
Same # of categories at Time 2 as at Time 1	46 (30.01)
Fewer categories at Time 2 than at Time 1	60 (39.22)
More categories at Time 2 than at Time 1	47 (30.72)

Note. N = 153

I also took changes in the content of the categories into account using the category codes described in the methods section. When category content was taken into account, the most common pattern of movement was to demonstrate fewer categories of purpose at Time 2, while retaining at least one category from Time 1, with all of the other patterns of movement containing nearly the same number of cases (See Table 4). When participants were categorized in this way, a clear plurality of students became more organized between Time 1 and Time 2. However, a chi-square test for a significant difference between this distribution and an equal distribution across the categories was not significant (Pearson chi-square (4) = 6.67; p = .154; Table 4). I ran a second chi-square analyses combining into one group those participants who remained at the same level of organization with those who became more organized, as both of these potentially indicated a level of focus and organization that may be atypical in fourteen-year-old adolescents. When this was done, the chi-square test for a difference from an equal distribution was significant (Pearson chi-square (3) = 36.42; p < .001; Table 4).

Table 4

Changes in the Number of Categories with Content Taken Into Account

Group	n (%)
Possibly Atypical Organization and Focus for 14-year-olds	
Fewer categories at Time 2, with at least 1 retained category from Time 1	42 (28.19)
Same number of categories at Time 2, with at least 1 retained category from Time 1	27 (18.12)
More categories at Time 2, with at least 1 category from Time 1	29 (19.46)
No common categories at Time 1 and Time 2	27 (18.20)
Categories outside of the coded categories at Time 1 or Time 2	24 (16.11)

Note. n = 149 (individuals who never identified a category of purpose were excluded); Pearson chi-square (4) = 6.67; p = .154 (when all categories remained separate); Pearson chi-square (3) = 36.42; p < .001 (when possibly atypical categories were combined into one category)

Summary of Results

This study drew from open-ended responses of adolescents to a direct question about purpose in life in order to understand more about the content,

number, and organization of possible intentions that adolescents attending a Catholic high school may include in their descriptions of their purposes. Most adolescents named one or two categories of intentions, and most adolescents demonstrated stability or became more organized about the intentions of their purposes between Time 1 and Time 2.

Discussion

I designed the study described here to better understand the content and organization of adolescent purpose during the transition between early and late adolescence among students attending a Catholic high school. Adolescence is a period during which prior research suggests it is unlikely that a majority of adolescents will demonstrate identified and engaged purpose, and that developing the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose is particularly atypical (Malin, et al., 2014; Quinn, 2016). This earlier research has often focused on ways in which individuals may be on the path to purpose, but not fully purposeful, *after* having identified a primary intention around which all other goals are organized. However, those who study adolescent purpose and those who wish to support its development during adolescence would also benefit from information about purposefulness in a period of time during which more than one intention is possible, and perhaps likely. Additionally, much of this research has not targeted adolescents who are in a school context that may be particularly likely to support purpose in general and the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose in particular.

In a number of ways, the results of this study are more optimistic than what previous research suggests about purpose during the transition between early and late adolescence. These findings provide support for further investigations into the ways in which Catholic high school environments may offer particularly rich contexts for the development of adolescent purpose. These results also contribute to broader developmental knowledge about adolescents, and to the ongoing scholarly discussion about how to define, measure, and support purpose during adolescence. At the same time, the coding strategy for this study relied on participant interpretations of "purpose" in a way that prior research has not, and the study included no comparison group of participants attending other Catholic schools or non-Catholic schools, both of which limit these interpretations.

One of the more optimistic results of this study is that a majority of participants included a desire to help others in the way that they described their purposes. This contrasts with previous research about purpose, which sug-

gests that the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose is the most difficult to gain and hardest to maintain during adolescence (Moran et al., 2013; Quinn, 2016). One of the possible explanations for this finding is that participants' familial and school contexts were particularly supportive of the development of both purpose in general and the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose in particular. Existing research about adolescent goals already shows that families are key influences on the content of adolescent goals and envisioned identities (Nurmi, 1991; Oyserman & James, 2011). Given that the families of the participants in this study chose a school that prioritized helping others, it is a fair assumption that at least a good number of those families also place a value on helping others. This normative expectation at the family level may show up in the content of these adolescents' purposes.

While families remain an important influence on adolescent goals, the peer context also takes on greater significance during these years, including the ways in which prosocial peers positively influence prosociality in adolescence (Barry & Wentzel, 2006; Wentzel, Filisetti, & Looney, 2007). Students attending the school included in the present study typically reported that their peers were generous with each other (Quinn, 2017). Thus *helping others* was a peer norm for the participants in this study, which likely influenced the ways in which many of them incorporated this intention into the ways in which they described their purposes.

 Likewise, participants attended a school that prioritized a relational understanding of the self. As described in the introduction to the present study, the potential distinctiveness of Catholic high schools may, in part, be explained by turning to King's (2003) proposal of the ways in which religion acts as an ideological, social, and spiritual context in which adolescents develop their purpose in life. The Catholic school that provided the context for this study expressed the ideology of Catholicism; provided spiritual modeling of purposeful individuals and service and leadership opportunities as parts of the social context; and embraced a Trinitarian spirituality grounded in relationship. Each of these contexts may interact with the increased formal operational and planning skills of adolescents to further develop purpose.

The way in which participants were asked about their purposes may also help to explain these optimistic results. The adolescents in this study were directly asked what they thought their purpose was or may be. Adolescents answering this direct question may respond with reference to actual or possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), and the direct question may especially access the individual's idea of their ideal or aspirational self. Especially in the

three to five sentence version included in the present study, the adolescent may write about his or her purpose as something envisioned, but not presently engaged. Information about what adolescents *hope* to be is helpful for those who want to support adolescents on their path to purpose. As Markus and Nurius (1986) highlight in their presentation of possible selves, possible selves are particularly susceptible to environmental influence, which is also true of the ways in which "sparks" may be nurtured in the positive youth development framework (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011). If those who work with adolescents are aware that many of them include a desire to help others in their aspirational selves, then there is more of an impetus to create and offer the types of relationships and environmental opportunities that would help adolescents transform their aspirational selves into actual selves, or to continue to ignite early sparks that involve intentions to help others.

Another optimistic finding of this study was that a majority of participating adolescents demonstrated patterns of stability and organization in the content of their purposes over the course of their first year attending a Catholic high school. In earlier research about purpose, *purpose seeking* or *exploration* has been distinguished from *identified purpose* (e.g., Hill & Burrow, 2012). Purpose seekers are those who are trying to discover if they have a purpose or what their purpose is, while those with identified purpose have found the primary and stable intention referenced in Damon et al.'s (2003) definition. There may, however, be a way of being purposeful that falls in between these two options: *purposeful explorers*. As described in the introduction, these individuals have also been described as *dabblers* (Moran, 2009), and yet less research attention has been given to individuals in this stage of purpose development. These *purposeful explorers* are different from those who are trying to figure out whether they have purpose, or who are dabbling in activities without yet having developed any ideas about purpose. Instead, *purposeful explorers*, are purposeful in the way that they consider multiple and changing intentions. By asking adolescents directly about their purposes, researchers may learn more about the content of purpose when adolescents are still in this highly exploratory stage.

Returning to King's (2003) proposal of the ways in which religions provide rich contexts for positive youth development outcomes, like purpose development, it may be that the organization and stability that emerged in these findings was supported by the unique features of the Catholic school environment within which participants engaged in purpose exploration. Participants in this study were immersed in an ideological, social, and spiritual

context that made normative the idea that individuals are meant to develop positive relationships with others and use their gifts and talents to contribute to others in some way. It may be that this context provided a framework for organizing purpose that is less afforded by school environments without these contextual features.

Limitations

While the findings of this study offer information that is relevant to understanding the development of purpose within the Catholic high school context, both the developmental findings and the ability of these findings to highlight the distinctiveness of the Catholic school environment are limited in ways that should be addressed in future work. While the findings of this study offer a somewhat optimistic view of purpose development during the transition between early and late adolescence, the study only included two relatively proximal time points for a life-long developmental task such as finding and enacting one's purpose. Therefore, the utility of these results is limited for learning about participants' future purpose trajectories. While many of their purpose intentions remained stable or became more organized during the course of their first year of high school, identity research would suggest that to the degree that identity and purpose are linked, the participants in this study may become more exploratory and less organized as they approach later adolescence and emerging adulthood before again stabilizing (Kroger, et al., 2010). Future work that incorporates multiple time points over longer periods of time would increase knowledge about the trajectory of purpose.

The findings of this study are also limited in their ability to uncover what may be distinctive about the Catholic high school environment for the development of adolescent purpose. The participants all attended a Catholic high school that focused, in part, on encouraging students to help others, go to college and on to fulfilling careers, and develop their faith in God. The effects of this school context, and of the families who made this school choice, may have been most influential on the findings related to the actual content of participants' purposes – where each of aspect of the school's mission was heavily represented in the coded categories of purpose. However, there is no way of confirming this without a comparative investigation of adolescents attending different types of high schools, including different types of Catholic high schools. Even within the broader category of Catholic schools, for example, there is much diversity, from differences that emerge from the unique

charisms of the religious orders running each school, to differences that may exist between order-run and diocesan schools, to differences that may exist in co-educational versus single-sex schools. With this in mind, it may be more accurate to say that the findings of this study reveal only what may be possible in a Catholic school environment, not that which is guaranteed or even typical. With this in mind, investigations of purpose development in a diversity of Catholic and non-Catholic schools would be fruitful, both for Catholic educators and for those interested in supporting purpose development in adolescents in a variety of school contexts.

Conclusion

While some contemporary research about purpose tells an unoptimistic story about purpose during the adolescent years, the results of the study presented here offer optimism and reasons to further investigate the contexts in which purpose develops and how purpose is measured during the adolescent years. The adolescents who took part in this study believed their lives had purpose and they were able to articulate the content of those purposes. Furthermore, over the course of their first year in high school, most of them remained stable in their purposes or became more organized around fewer categories of purpose. Catholic school educators can leverage the existing characteristics of the Catholic high school environment to provide supports that allow adolescents to further discover and refine the intentions of their purposes, and researchers can learn from this to consider new and multiple ways of measuring purpose during the adolescent years.

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