



WHAT'S YOUR WHY? QUESTIONS TO CULTIVATE MEANING

"It's not the answers that enlighten us, but the questions."

-Eugene Ionesco

OVERVIEW

Students reflect on questions about purpose, meaning, and connection.

LEVELS

- PreK/Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To expand students' thinking and help them start thinking about purpose and meaning
- To connect learning to greater meaning and purpose
- At the beginning and end of the year, giving students the opportunity to reflect on how their answers change
- To increase students' sense of connection to the world around them

TIME REQUIRED

- < 30 minutes (ongoing, once a week or monthly)

LEVEL

- PreK/Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

MATERIALS

- Writing tool (pen, pencil)
- Journals (optional)

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will:
 - Reflect on and journal about questions regarding purpose, meaning, and connection to inspire deeper thinking and personal growth

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Supports, Modifications, and Accommodations for Students](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Curiosity
- Wisdom
- Humanity
- Spirituality

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-awareness
- Social Awareness

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open Awareness
- Non-judgment

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to reflect on some of these questions:
 - What gives you meaning in your work and in your life?
 - What makes you feel most connected to others?
 - In which situations do you feel most like yourself? What are you doing? Who are you with?
- Do you remember what your big questions were as a child, specifically the age of your students? What felt meaningful and important to you?
- How might considering these big questions about life and purpose add meaning to students' school-work?

- Did any big questions cause you distress or worry? How might you scaffold the following practice to create space for these feelings, while also exploring these questions? Consider that students' backgrounds may strongly impact their answers to these questions—be sure to welcome all their responses (as long as they don't cause harm to themselves or others).
- Consider doing some of these community-builder practices before engaging in this practice:
 - [Cultivate a Positive Classroom Climate for Younger Students](#) | Greater Good In Education
 - [Cultivate a Positive Classroom Climate for Older Students](#) | Greater Good In Education
 - Consider reviewing [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#) to make the practice invitational and safe for all students.

INSTRUCTIONS

The search for meaning is an inherent part of being human. Yet our educational system doesn't often provide students the time or opportunity to think about their place in the universe or what they value most. Giving students a moment to reflect on questions that help them discover a sense of meaning, both individually and collectively, helps start them on a path towards [lifelong well-being](#).

INTRODUCE THE QUESTION

- There are many ways to introduce these kinds of questions. You might ask students whether they like to daydream about the future or if they ever take time to think about what is most important to them. Is there a book that your class is reading in which the characters discuss or discover what is meaningful to them? Because you know your students best, consider how you might interest students in reflecting on these questions. After doing the exercise once or twice, many students start to look forward to the questions!
- Present one question to your class. (Some age-appropriate examples provided below, many of which work for other ages.):
 - Lower Elementary:
 - What makes you feel happy and peaceful inside? What makes your family feel happy and peaceful?
 - What makes you feel happy when you are with a group of people?
 - What is one thing you feel really, really grateful for? What is one thing your family is really grateful for?
 - What makes you feel special? How does your family make each other feel special?
 - How do you show kindness to others? How does your family show kindness to each other and to people who are not in your family?
 - What is the most amazing thing about nature? How does your family like to spend time in nature?
 - What makes you curious about the world? What is your family curious about the world?
 - What do you wonder about when you look at the stars?
 - Upper Elementary:

- What do you think is a gift or talent that you have (or your family has) that you'd like to offer the world that will make it a better place for everyone?
 - When do you feel that you can most be yourself? In other words, you don't have to pretend to like something or that you have to do something you don't want to do. You can be silly or quiet or sad or joyful or share how you really feel.
 - Which value is most important to you and why: kindness, honesty, or courage? Which of these same values is most important to your family and why?
 - What do you think it means to be part of something bigger than yourself? Do you ever feel this way?
 - What is something good that you do (or your family does) that affects people you don't know or people who are far away?
 - When do you feel most amazed by the world? When does your family feel amazed by the world?
- Middle/High School:
 - What brings you joy in life? What brings joy to your family/community?
 - What did you dream of doing when you were younger? What hopes does your family/community have for you?
 - When do you feel most alive? When do you feel most alive when you are with your family/community?
 - If you could do one thing to make the world a better place, what would it be? If your family/community could do one thing to make the world a better place, what would it be?
 - When do you feel most like yourself? When do you feel most yourself when you are with your family/community?
 - When do you feel most amazed by the world? What amazes your family/community most about the world?
 - How do you want to be remembered 100 years from now? How does your family/community want to be remembered 100 years from now?
 - What makes you feel connected to people across the globe, most of whom you'll never meet? What connects your family/community to people around the globe?
 - What privileges do you have, and what responsibility comes with them? What privileges does your family/community have, and what responsibility comes with them?
 - How do you balance self-care with caring for others? How does your family/community care for themselves and each other?

JOURNAL OR DRAW

- Invite students to think silently about the question for a couple minutes, and then journal or draw about their answer. Encourage them to write or draw freely - whatever comes to mind related to the question. It's an exercise for them to explore a question that might be new to them.

SHARE AND DISCUSS

- Invite students to share their answers in pairs, a small group, or a whole class discussion. **Be sure to let students know that they don't have to share.**
- Some potential question prompts (but feel free to explore your own as well):
 - Do you notice any similarities among our answers or things we are curious about?
 - What connects us together as humans? How are we similar?
 - What important and valuable differences do we have? Why is understanding our differences important?

CLOSURE

- Invite students to reflect on this experience either verbally or privately in their journals. What did they learn about themselves and others? Did anything surprise them?

OPTIONAL EXTENSIONS

- Invite students to write their own questions on small slips of paper. Then gather them in a jar and choose one every week or so for students to answer.
- Wonder Walk: Do this practice while on a nature walk.

SOURCE

Jenna Whitehead, Ph.D., Simon Fraser University

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Were there any barriers for students to participate? If you were to try this again, what might you modify or try differently next time?
- Do you notice whether students are thinking or wondering more deeply after this exercise?
- How might you check back in with these questions throughout the school year? Could you relate some lessons to these big questions?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In one [study](#), 52 children in an English primary school, ages 7-9, took a 10-week class about spirituality that included quiet thinking time, questioning, discussions, and sharing. Afterward, when researchers looked at the children's drawings and talked with them, the kids said they understood themselves better, had a clearer sense of what mattered to them, and found it easier to connect with other people.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Western scientists describe [spirituality](#) as a deep personal belief system - one that involves searching for meaning and purpose, cultivating awareness of the self and world around us, and fostering a sense of connection with others and something greater than ourselves.

[According to researchers](#), children have a natural capacity for [spirituality](#), visible in their curiosity about the world and search for meaning, as well as their desire for connection. Their experience and understanding of spirituality [matures](#) with their developing cognitive and social skills but research also shows it can be supported and encouraged through active [reflection and questioning](#).

Spirituality is also [protective](#) for children and adolescents. Having a sense of meaning in life and connectedness with others contributes to greater [happiness](#), [life satisfaction](#), and even [decreased risky behaviors](#). Being able to connect what they are learning in school to a greater sense of purpose helps students find school work more [meaningful](#), and contributes to better [academic success](#).

TERMS OF USE

Thank you for downloading this resource! Please feel free to share it with friends, teachers, colleagues, and anyone else who might benefit from it.

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Please email us at ggsceducation@berkeley.edu with any questions about our programs and resources for educators.

With gratitude,
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