

# B-Unbound White Paper

Who, What, When, Where, Why & How

Scott Boldt

June 2022

NAVIGATING  
OUR WAY

Breaking down the walls which  
narrowly define young people's potential

# READ ALL ABOUT IT



# B-UNBOUND WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY & HOW

**T**he task of a journalist when covering a news item is to answer the who-what-when-where-why-how of a story so that readers, listeners, or viewers gain knowledge and an understanding of what has happened or is happening.

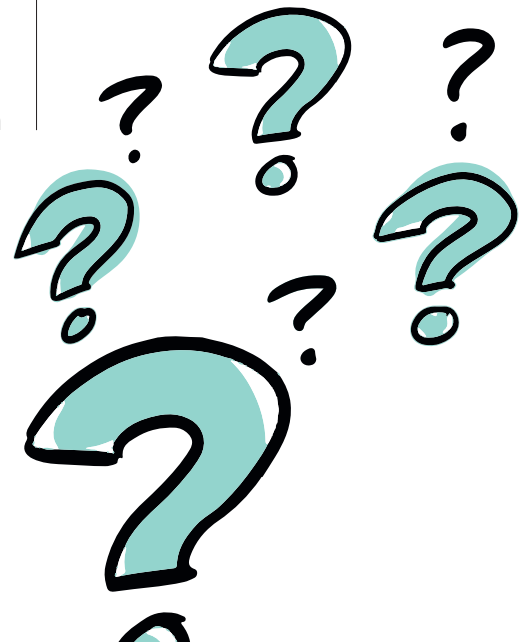
**Similarly,** the purpose of a white paper is to provide an in-depth report about a topic, program, or initiative as well as the problems that surround it to give readers detailed information so that issues can be addressed or good decisions can be made in relation to them.

This white paper on B-Unbound has been commissioned by Big Picture Learning to provide a clear articulation of the initiative and to set out its underlying principles and the problems it seeks to address. In so doing, this report will present and answer the who-what-when-where-why-how of B-Unbound.

B-Unbound is an initiative of Big Picture Learning in partnership with Straight Up Impact. B-Unbound connects youth (aged 14-24), referred to as Navigators, to adults who can help support them in pursuing and expanding their

interests; B-Unbound builds a community of peers learning to navigate their way together.

Connected to trusted community-based organizations, B-Unbound trains Advisors/Co-Navigators to guide the Navigators in the use of the B-Unbound platform to find Supportive Adults working in their area of interest who may serve as mentors, guides, sources of knowledge/expertise, inspirers, or connectors.



# OVERVIEW

## B -UNBOUND

is based on Big Picture Learning principles, and it was created by the co-founder of Big Picture Learning, Dr. Elliot Washor.



**Big Picture Learning (BPL)** was established over 25 years ago by Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor as a school transformation movement built on innovative educational principles with a primary focus on learning – in and out of school.

**The 10 Distinguishers** of BPL are set out on page 6. One of the main principles of BPL is 'One-Student-

at-a-Time' which recognizes that every student brings her/his unique abilities, interests, needs, circumstances, and context into school and into their learning.

**Typically, in a BPL school, each student is part of an advisory, a learning community,** led by a supportive advisor (teacher) who guides students to identify their needs and interests which are in turn formed into negotiated learning plans and goals that make learning personal, engaging, and relevant with the participation of families and mentors.

**A student-driven curriculum is developed around real world experiences and standards.** The student is the curriculum and the school is the community. Interest-driven internships are key to the BPL approach. Mentorship in a real-world setting offers students access to skilled adults and therefore to deep learning and skill development in a field in which they are committed and passionate.

All students are challenged to pursue their interests and are supported by a community of educators, professionals, and family members.



**BPL schools support the concept of 'leaving-to-learn'** which enables the powerful learning that occurs when students leave their school as part of the school program to expand and deepen their learning, to get exposure to new ideas, people and opportunities, and to learn through their interests in the best places where those interests are happening - in real-world settings and workplaces in relationship with adults.

As Elliot Washor says:

**“We know that learning happens best when interests, relationships, and practice are woven together. People learn more quickly, more deeply, more comprehensively, and more meaningfully when they are pursuing their interests with skilled people who know them and let them practice, play, make mistakes, start over again, ask more questions, test things out and then show what they can do.”**



**Pam Roy, co-founder of Straight Up Impact**, a film company focused on inspiring societal change, had long been aligned with the principles of BPL and saw the opportunity to expand its framework through community-led initiatives. She joined Elliot as co-founder of B-Unbound with the goal of creating fertile environments that promote dignity, meaningful pursuits, and multi-age relationships - 'one youth at a time' - within communities.

Pam said:

**“B-Unbound recognizes the unique and irreplaceable contribution each person can make and the importance of allowing youth to learn the freedom of choice and responsibilities inherent in their decisions. Meaning is specific to each person and cannot be created or given, it must be discovered.”**

Pam observed that “BPL’s relational rather than transactional approach to youth helps them learn about who they are and how they can best contribute.” Freed from the confines of linear systems, B-Unbound expands possibilities and inspires communities of aliveness for all ages.

**BPL has been learning with learners of all ages, all across the country and the world for the past 25 years** and has learned, along with Straight Up Impact, that people are searching for meaning in their lives, and they are looking for connection with others and with their world. Too many young people are not thriving in school and in their communities, or they are barely surviving, or they have decided to disengage. B-Unbound creates a Navigator community where learners can connect with each other around their interests, online and face-to-face.



**Research shows that relationships are critical for learning** and that connecting with other people is the most important factor in developing autonomous motivation; relationships are often catalysts for people finding meaning and purpose in their lives. B-Unbound emphasizes being WITH and MATTERING.

**Navigators are on a journey doing what they WANT, and fellow Navigators and adults are WITH them** – learning with them, interacting, guiding, suggesting, sharing ideas, skills, and experiences, accompanying, and connecting them with others. B-Unbound believes that when youth are with others who share their interests, listen to them and support them, they feel that they matter and that their interests matter. Reflecting on BPL, Elliot observed, “We are fortunate to continue to be nimble and always changing as we muddle through, mingle with and matter to students, families, staff and communities.”

**At B-Unbound, learners are learning because they want to, not because they have to.** B-Unbound Navigators will not be asking a question, such as, ‘Do I have to do this?’ or ‘Why do I have to learn this?’ because they are pursuing what they are interested in; therefore, there are no issues of motivation or being bored. Interest, purpose, and motivation go together.

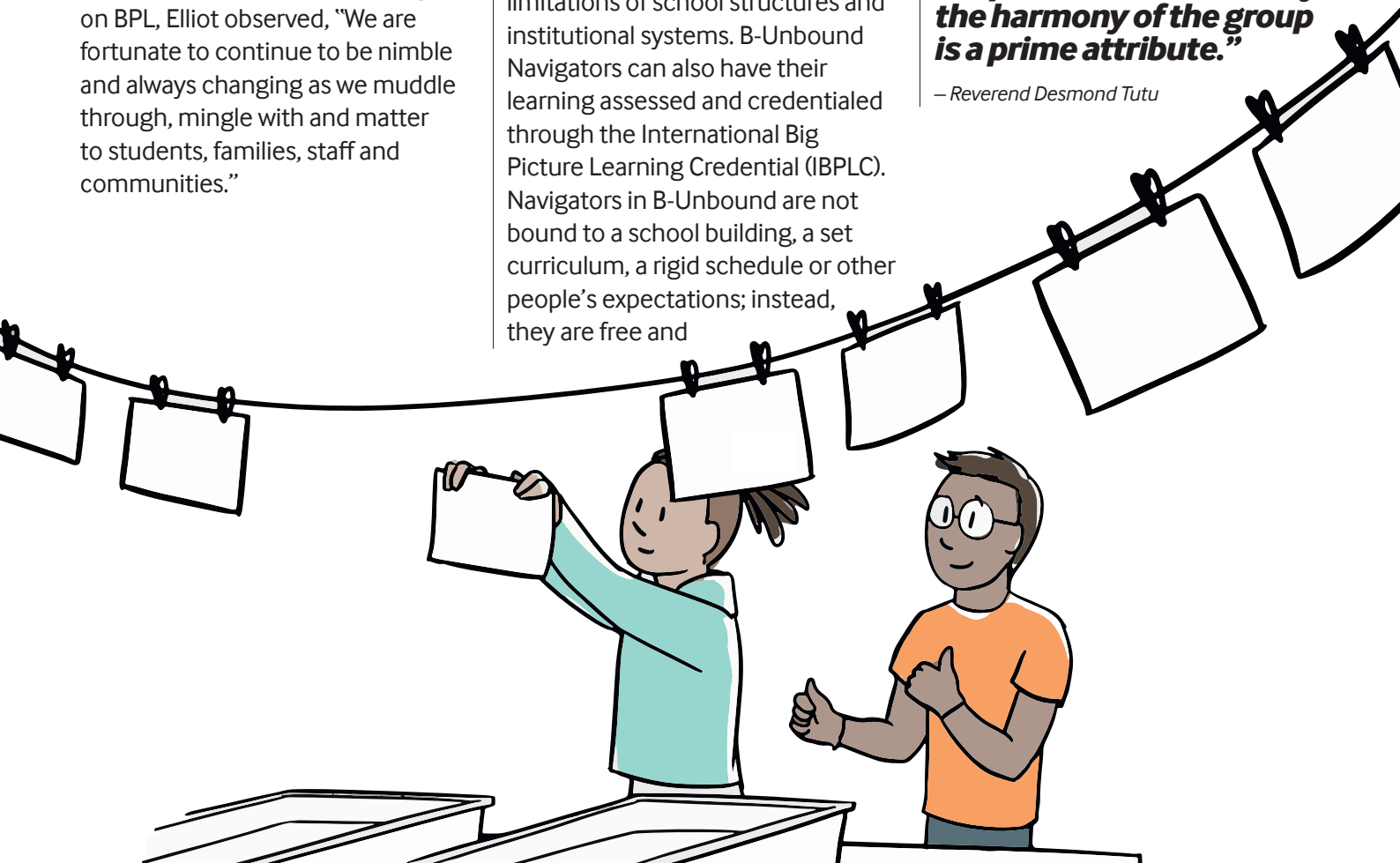
**The learners are called Navigators because they drive their learning by pursuing their passions** with the support of adults who have competencies, experience, and skills connected with their interests.

B-Unbound offers opportunities for real-world engagement with peers and adults through an easy-to-use digital platform uncoupled from the limitations of school structures and institutional systems. B-Unbound Navigators can also have their learning assessed and credentialed through the International Big Picture Learning Credential (IBPLC). Navigators in B-Unbound are not bound to a school building, a set curriculum, a rigid schedule or other people’s expectations; instead, they are free and

supported to explore, to discover, to travel at their own pace and in ways that suit them best. B-Unbound unbinds learners from the control and content of a prescribed curriculum and liberates learners to learn and develop real-world competencies matched to real-world standards with an engaged community of learners. In B-Unbound, the Navigator is the curriculum, and the school is their community and world.

“**A person is a person through other persons. You can’t be a solitary human being. It’s all linked. We have this communal sense, and because of this deep sense of community, the harmony of the group is a prime attribute.**”

– Reverend Desmond Tutu



# 10 BPL DISTINGUISHERS

**Big Picture Learning schools exist throughout the country and the world. They are in rural environments and urban environments. B-Unbound incorporates the principles successfully developed by BPL.**

They serve both large and small populations of students. Some Big Picture schools exist in gleaming new buildings, while some can be found in retrofitted structures which haven't been in use for some time. In short, Big Picture schools (like the students they serve) often look dramatically different than one another. Each is its own unique environment where students can flourish as individuals within a community of learners. However, there are many elements within our learning design that are uncommon and distinct, which pull our network together and distinguish them from most other schools.

**One Student at a Time** - The entire learning experience is personalized to each student's interests, talents and needs. Personalization expands beyond mere academic work and involves looking at each student holistically.

**Advisory Structure** - Advisory is the core organizational and relational structure of a Big Picture Learning school, its heart and soul, often described as a 'second family' by students. Students stay with an advisor and a group of fellow classmates for four years, building

close personal relationships that last a lifetime.

**Learning Through Interests and Internships (LTIs)** - Real world learning is best accomplished in the real world. Big Picture students intern - often twice a week for an entire school day - with experts in their field of interest, completing authentic projects and gaining experience and exposure to how their interests intersect with the real world.

**Parent and Family Engagement** - Parents are welcome and valued members of the school community and play a proactive role in their children's learning, collaborating in the planning and assessment of student work. They use their assets to support the work of the school, and often play an integral role in building relationships with potential LTI mentors.

**School Culture** - In Big Picture schools, there is palpable trust, respect and equality between and among students and adults. Students take leadership roles in the school, and teamwork defines the adult culture. Student voice is valued in the school decision making process and visitors are struck by the ease with which students interact with adults.

**Authentic Assessment** - Students are assessed not by tests, but by public displays of learning that track growth and progress in the student's area of interest. Assessment criteria are individualized to the student and the real world standards of a project. Students present multiple

exhibitions each year and discuss their learning growth with staff, parents, peers, and mentors.

**School Organization** - Schools are organized around a culture of collaboration and communication. They are not bound by the structures of buildings, schedules, bells, or calendars. There is an interdependence between school and community.

**Leadership** - Leadership is shared and spread between a strong, visionary principal; a dedicated, responsible team of advisors and other staff; and students. The community functions as a democracy. A pervasive sense of shared ownership drives a positive culture dedicated to ongoing improvement.

**Post-Secondary Planning** - Students develop plans that contribute to their future success-- be it through college, trades, schools, travel, the military, or the workforce.

**Professional Development** - Regular advisor PD is conducted at each school by principals, other school staff, and BPL staff and coaches. A Big Picture School is a community of lifelong learners who embrace continuous improvement.

B-Unbound applies these principles through the community rather than through schools to create accessibility for all youth; it is BPL without the school.

# WHO IS B-UNBOUND?

**T**he Director of B-Unbound is Anthonette Peña and three Navigators are serving as Ambassadors of B-Unbound.

They all have a strong social media presence and have been spreading the word about B-Unbound through videos, podcasts, and at educational conferences. BPL, Straight Up Impact and B-Unbound all share a commitment to equity, and Anthonette noted that ...

**“***B-Unbound provides youth with the opportunity to explore their interests and connect with amazing adults without needing lots of money, resources, or time.***”**

She believes that the B-Unbound platform is empowering because, “it gives youth with no connections the chance to be connected to people and opportunities that they couldn’t get any other way”. These relationships become valuable social capital and open up possibilities for many young people that would not otherwise be available.

Relationships are at the heart of B-Unbound because, as Pam states:

**“***to be human is to be outside of yourself; we are always social and in relationship to others.***”**

Elliot emphasizes that B-Unbound is about forming communities of practice and communities of connections based around shared interests. He uses the phrase ‘navigating OUR way’ to stress that the ‘who’ of B-Unbound are its communities of learners and supporters as opposed to individuals who are simply using a service. Therefore, B-Unbound is a relational platform which consists of the following categories of people who are linked to one another.

## **Navigators:**

B-Unbound was established to serve and support any and all young people, aged 14-24, who have an interest they want to pursue with fellow youth and Supportive Adults who work in their area of interest and are willing to engage with them. Navigators may be students who are in high school, young people who have dropped out of school, 20 year olds who are working and have a passion they want to pursue, high school graduates who chose not to go to college but want to explore an interest or a profession in more depth, youth who are struggling and are unsure what to do in life, young people who want to do something to improve their community and world, or young adults who are employed, in college, apprenticing, or searching who will benefit from a supportive community connected to their interests.



**Co-Navigators:**

B-Unbound is organized and facilitated by adults who serve in an advisory capacity to Navigators. A Co-Navigator does not have to be a qualified teacher or educator, and B-Unbound provides all the necessary training to work with Navigators and Supportive Adults. Co-Navigators function much like an Advisor in a BPL school who knows the students well, oversees their learning, and provides the support, guidance, encouragement, and connections to facilitate student-driven learning in their areas if interest.

The role of the Co-Navigator is to guide youth in using the B-Unbound platform, to assist them in connecting with Supportive Adults,

to liaise with Supportive Adults, and to help in the growth of B-Unbound in their area or region. The digital platform provides a rich data base of Supportive Adults, and Co-Navigators are active in promoting B-Unbound and adding to the range and depth of adults willing to serve as experts, mentors, and supporters. They also are involved in explaining the process of engaging with Navigators to Supportive Adults and ensuring that all the relationships are safe and appropriate.

as a few hours a year or a few hours a month, to serving as a mentor on a weekly basis. The main criteria are that the adult has something to offer and wants to make a difference in a young person’s life. The Table on page 9 shows the guidance B-Unbound provides to Supportive Adults for ways to connect with Navigators, planning considerations, and time commitments.

**Supportive Adults:**

In B-Unbound, Supportive Adults (ages 25+) support Navigators who share similar interests by volunteering (locally or virtually) because they have real-world experiences to contribute. Supportive Adult roles can vary widely when it comes to priorities, capabilities, and time commitment; this may involve spending as little



← 14-24 →





Supportive Adult’s roles can differ widely when it comes to priorities, capabilities and time commitment. Whether you can spend a few hours a year or a few hours a month, you can make a difference in a

young person’s life. This menu provides examples of engagement options. Each option includes a brief description, planning consideration requirements, as well as suggested time commitments for guidance.



## Supportive Adult: Engagement Menu

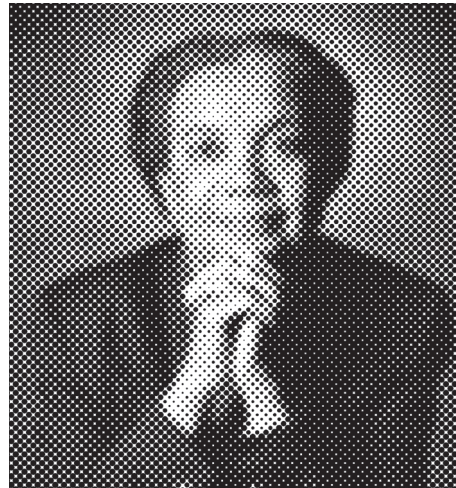
	Description	Planning Considerations	Suggested Time Commitment
<b>Connector</b>	Leverage your connections to help find Supportive Adults who share an interest with a Navigator.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ongoing communications via newsletter and emails with B-Unbound program staff</li> <li>Does NOT engage directly with youth</li> </ul>	As Needed
<b>Informational Interview</b> (In-person or Virtual)	Engage with Navigator in-person or digitally (e.g. Zoom, email) around their interests to answer questions about work, workplace, freelancing, and careers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prepare summary of personal learning and career journey</li> <li>Company/industry overview</li> <li>Challenges of being an entrepreneur/freelancer</li> </ul>	2-3 hours
<b>Workplace Tour</b> (In-person)	Host Navigator inside work facilities to allow them to see and experience work activities and company/ industry culture firsthand OR explain how you work independently and show your creative spaces.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tour route</li> <li>Engagement of other staff</li> <li>Reserve facilities</li> <li>Describe network of relationships</li> </ul>	2-4 hours
<b>Shadow Day</b> (In-person)	Engage with Navigator to show what a 'day in the life' of a job, a project, or industry involves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Security and safety</li> </ul>	4-6 hours
<b>Passion/Skill Building</b>  (In-person or Virtual)	Instruct Navigator with a new skill or interest in an activity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to supplies and equipment</li> </ul>	Ongoing, varies
<b>Project Sponsorship</b> (In-person or Virtual)	Provide authentic projects for Navigator to complete, including coaching from industry professionals along the way.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Determine problem statement</li> <li>Coach through project design process</li> <li>Reserve facilities, recruit associates for project check-ins, and project review</li> </ul>	Ongoing, varies
<b>Internship/ Apprenticeship</b> (In-person or Virtual)	Navigators perform real work activities under the supervision of professionals (maybe paid or unpaid).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Process for on-boarding, continuous feedback and evaluation.</li> <li>Dedicated working space and necessary equipment, ongoing availability of manager OR of freelancer/entrepreneur</li> </ul>	Ongoing, varies
<b>Career Mentoring</b> (In-person or Virtual)	One to one relationship between professionals and Navigator to support pathfinding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Process for on-boarding, continuous feedback and evaluation.</li> <li>Frequency of check-ins</li> </ul>	Ongoing, varies

## Parents

As with BPL, B-Unbound values and promotes family engagement, particularly with parents of Navigators. Elliot and Pam are in the process of writing a book and developing accompanying workshops to support parents with tools to help their children to be unbound in the active pursuit of their learning.

Parents are often the 'gate-keepers', especially for younger children, and there is a need for their 'buy in' and backing for Navigators to gain the most from B-Unbound. The B-Unbound team respects this and, "there is not a formula for doing this work. There are existing parents who are already inspired and can act as catalysts to inspire others. B-Unbound gives a framework for them". B-Unbound connects with parents through its relationships

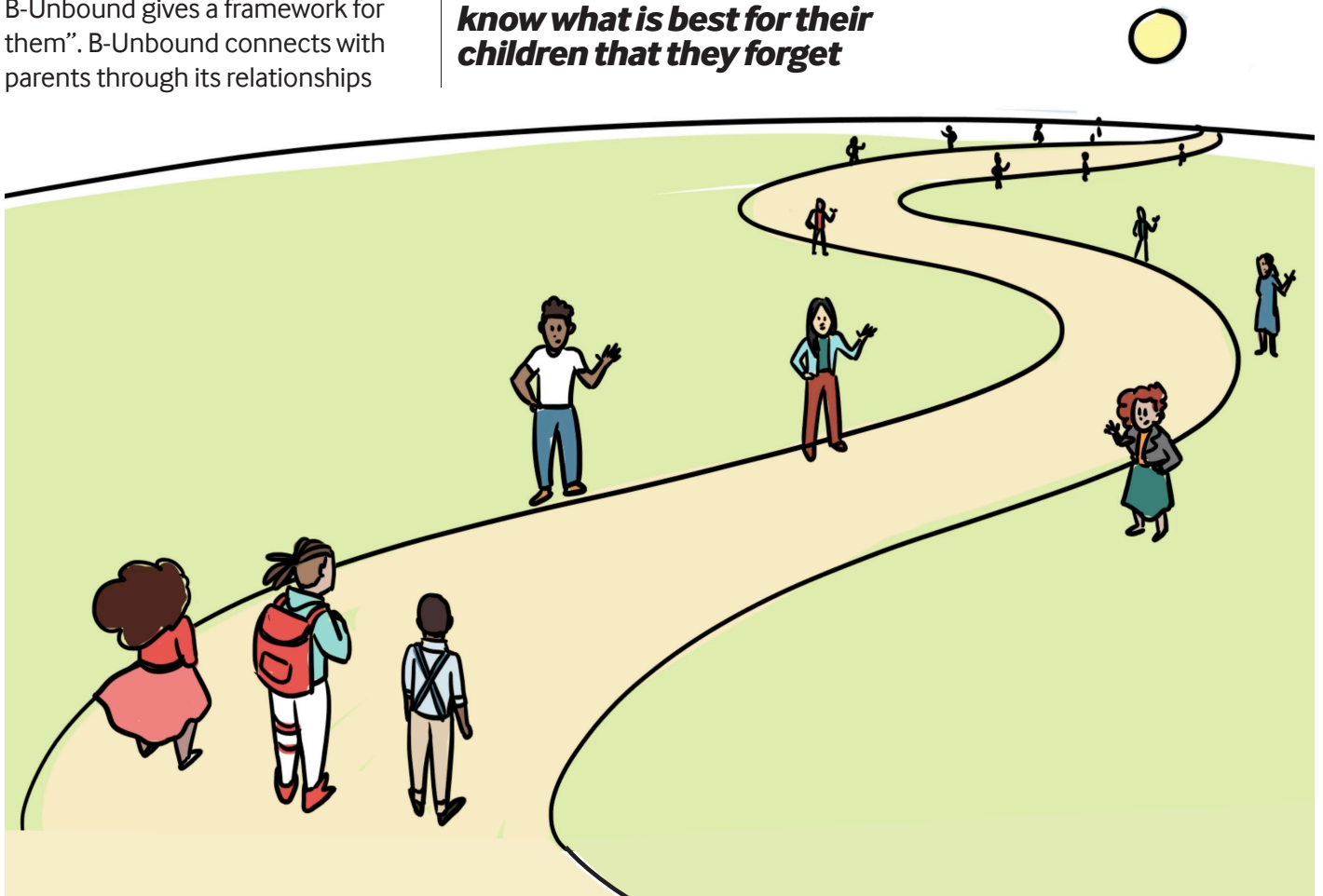
with community-based organizations, home school resource centers, after-school programs, and maker spaces as well as directly and through its Navigators.



**that they themselves are really the experts. ... Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it. When I fight about what is going on in the neighborhood, or when I fight about what is happening to other people's children, I'm doing that because I want to leave a community and a world that is better than the one I found."**

Marian Wright Edelman

**“Parents have become so convinced that educators know what is best for their children that they forget**



**B-Unbound recognizes and is designed around the importance and 'educative power' of relationships.** From birth, people learn habits, skills, language, concepts, behaviors and identity from relationships. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory suggests that learning is inherently a social process, indistinguishable from the relationships in people's lives. He states that learning is,

**“*Embedded within social events and occurring as a child interacts with people, objects and events in the environment.*”**

*(Vygotsky, 1986)*

The fact that learning happens through relationships is the foundation upon which the practice of Collaborative Learning is based. “Interaction constitutes the learning process (Lantolf and Pavlenko 1995, Lantolf and Thorne 2006). Social interaction is viewed as the prerequisite for the growth and development of cognition (Donato and McCormick 1994) and physical and symbolic tools that mediate

human interaction cannot be separated from the social milieu in which it is carried out (Wersch 1993)”. (Lin, 2015) Vygotsky and theorists of Collaborative Learning highlight the interdependence and relational locus of learning, emphasizing that people need relationships to learn; it is an organic, social process. Furthermore, it has been found that the establishment of long-term adult relationships by youth lead to high levels of learning.

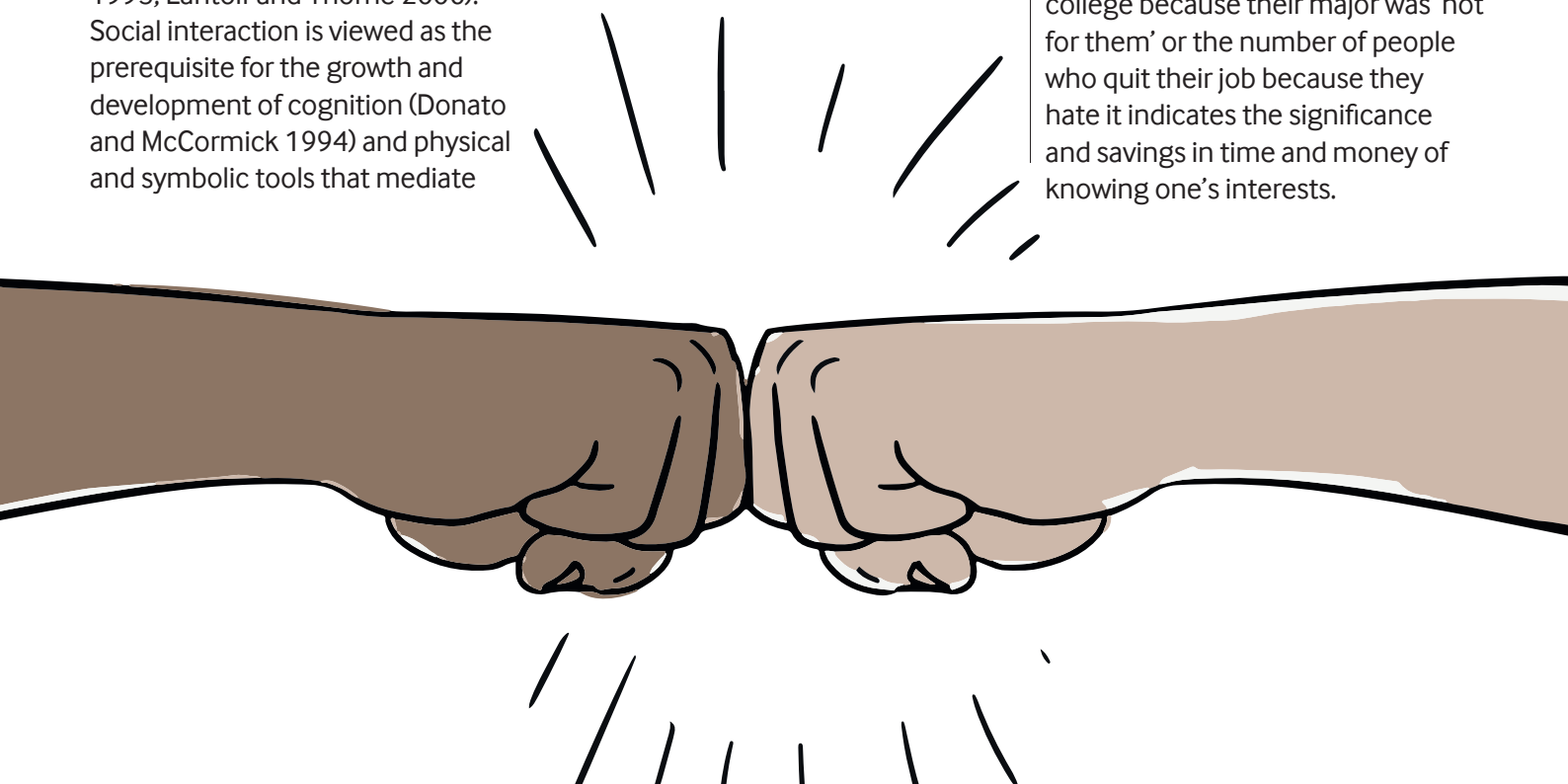
The experience of BPL shows that students who are learning with mentors in real-world settings develop skills and relationships that carry them forward into further learning and relevant career opportunities. The relationships that form with mentors create a supportive connection which is often necessary to keep students interested so they can see the relevance of their work and the benefits of further learning.

Although an obvious point, schools and colleges often overlook the fact that learning and interests become deepened through relationships with professionals in the community which in turn enhance life and employment skills, because they are practicing and learning the 'tricks of the trade' and receiving tacit knowledge in the relevant workplaces with adults who are working to real-world standards.

B-Unbound also provides an important benefit that is often not appreciated. As Anthonette pointed out,

**“*It can be just as valuable to realize after trying something out that you are not interested in it.*”**

The usefulness of a person knowing that something is 'not what it was cracked up to be' may be difficult to measure but considering how many young people drop out of college because their major was 'not for them' or the number of people who quit their job because they hate it indicates the significance and savings in time and money of knowing one's interests.



# WHAT IS B-UNBOUND?

**T**his question may be answered by the following.

**B-Unbound is an initiative of BPL and Straight Up Impact offering relational learning opportunities for people aged 14-24 who want to learn and do things that matter to them with others who share their interest(s) and with Supportive Adults (aged 25+) willing to share their experience, knowledge, and insights relevant to those interests.**

**B-Unbound provides the support infrastructure (Co-Navigators) and a learning community platform able to connect Navigators not only with those near to them but also with Supportive Adults anywhere in the world.**

**On the other hand, for B-Unbound, there is no 'what' in the sense that there is no prescribed content, pathway, program, or requirements** (apart from being 14-24 years old and having an interest). The 'what' is decided by the Navigators, what they are interested in, and where their interests take them. The learner is the curriculum, and the community and the adults they connect with become their 'school'. As a few examples, there are Navigators interested in creating illustrations, anti-racism, cooking, entrepreneurship, mental health, maritime trades, and poetry. The range of interests continues to expand, diversify, and deepen as more young people join B-Unbound.

**This lack of 'what' is an important principle that highlights a key value of B-Unbound.** For so many young people, the 'what' of their lives is determined or chosen by adults. Frustratingly for most young people, especially as they reach their teenage years, their lives and activities are largely bounded by what adults think is best for them, their education, and their future.

**B-Unbound values agency and self-efficacy, learning by discovery, and learning by mistakes.** In schools, learners are often inhibited towards, if not deprived of learning

opportunities because of a well or over-organized program where students have few or no decisions to make on a day-to-day basis. When people are told what, when, where, with whom, and how to do something, they may learn some content and gain a level of competency, but this is nothing compared to a learner making decisions about what, when, where, how and with whom to learn, most especially if it is connected with their interests and happening with others who share that interest and are willing to demonstrate their skills while allowing the learner to practice them.

**Self Determination Theory** explains how people's psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) are assets for motivation because when these needs are supported, optimal functioning is facilitated and this leads to psychological wellbeing.

*(Ryan and Deci, 2000).*



“

**Self-Determination Theory suggests that, behaviours are driven by three innate psychological needs in every human being:**

## **Autonomy**

**(the need to feel ownership of one's behavior),**

## **Competence**

**(the need to produce desired outcomes and to experience mastery), and**

## **Relatedness**

**(the need to feel connected to others).**

**When the three psychological needs are satisfied in a particular context, intrinsic motivation will increase.”**

*(Wang, Liu, Kee and Chian, 2019)*

In most high school and college situations as well as in entry-level jobs, **the motivation of young people is extrinsic and controlled rather than intrinsic and autonomous.**

This may explain why significant issues can happen to youth at this age when their basic needs are not being met or are being frustrated, because this will have a negative effect on psychological well-being and healthy functioning.

Students and young workers typically are motivated (extrinsically) to obtain good grades/wages and to please their parents/employers (avoid sham), and most schools and many workplaces operate with policies based on reward and punishment.

Self-Determination Theory indicates that acting for or being compelled by controlled motives is unhealthy because, “behavior will tend only to persist as long as the external

contingency is present and will not lead to adaptive outcomes such as positive affect, perceived competence, and satisfaction. As a consequence, fostering autonomous motivation toward activities in educational contexts is important if self-regulated persistence is to be promoted.”

*(Hagger and Chatzisarantis, 2016)*

B-Unbound has been designed to foster autonomy by creating environments and relationships for youth to express, explore, and pursue their interests without the limitations of external regulation. Motivation to participate as a Navigator is intrinsic, it builds personal agency, and supports psychological well-being and healthy pursuits.



# WHEN & WHERE IS B-UNBOUND?

**A**s indicated in the name, **B-Unbound is not bound by time or place, so it can be happening anytime and anywhere and in many ways.**

In fact, before B-Unbound was established in the USA, Big Picture Learning in Kenya was doing a version of B-Unbound. Kenya BPL does not have a school but for over 4 years ago, the Kenya BPL team has been working with some students and selected teachers in 10 community schools as well as with out-of-school youth. The team there has employed the principles of BPL to the work with learners and has connected them with mentors and supportive adults in the community. In the USA, B-Unbound is already active in nearly 20 states through the BPL program, Harbor Freight Fellowship Initiative. The Fellowship program provides high school students across the United States with opportunities in the real world to complete a 120 hour apprenticeship experience with a mentor connected

to interests in the skilled trades. The Harbor Freight Fellowship Initiative is part of a movement for educational change and for enhancing the status of skilled trades. Through nominations, the program identifies students who display an active interest and a burgeoning aptitude in a trade and then offers them a pathway to develop and pursue their interest in a real world work setting. In an interview with Anthonette, she described B-Unbound in one way as,

**“BPL for youth who don’t have access to our schools.”**

Anthonette told a B-Unbound story of a Navigator who lives in the southwest and discovered B-Unbound through his girlfriend who attends a BPL school in Vermont. When he mentioned that he did not like his high school, she said that he should find a BPL school in Arizona. He searched for one only to discover that there are

no BPL schools there at the moment; however, his search brought him to B-Unbound. Anthonette, based in California, serves as his Co-Navigator, and he has been connected to Supportive Adults online who are based in other states.

The B-Unbound platform allows for Navigators to be anywhere in the world and many are spread out across the US.

**Likewise, the digital platform means that Supportive Adults can be connected to a Navigator virtually which opens up the world,** and there are already several who are based overseas. In Spain, BPL España was established this year and B-Unbound España is due to be launched in September, 2022. The B-Unbound web-site is also accessible in Spanish.



# WHY B-UNBOUND?

**T**he answer to this question could be voluminous. In simple terms however there is a great need for young people to be able to connect with adults around things that matter to them who are open to support them, to help them explore and expand their interests, and to guide them towards opportunities that they may be unaware of or deprived access to.

As will be clear below, there are also compelling reasons for a program to provide ways for young people to discover meaning in their lives, to pursue purposeful and healthy

pathways, and to find their own way (in community) to contribute their unique gifts, talents, and abilities to the world.

**Sadly, there are some stark realities that call forth for an initiative such as B-Unbound.**

These stark realities relate to the fact that the education systems we have long relied on are not preparing youth for the skills needed for today's economy or for life; even those completing a bachelor's degree are often underemployed, and many who have been 'successful' in school are struggling to discover their way forward and to find meaning in their life. The research literature makes this clear. "The youth employment crisis has reached intolerable dimensions. It poses a threat to political stability and social cohesion. This is evidenced by higher unemployment, lower quality jobs, rising marginalization of youth and among them, slow transition from school to work, detachment from the labour market, and other

symptoms. Young people are particularly vulnerable to volatile and unstable economic conditions and a whole generation of young people, as a result, face much bleaker life prospects than any previous one".

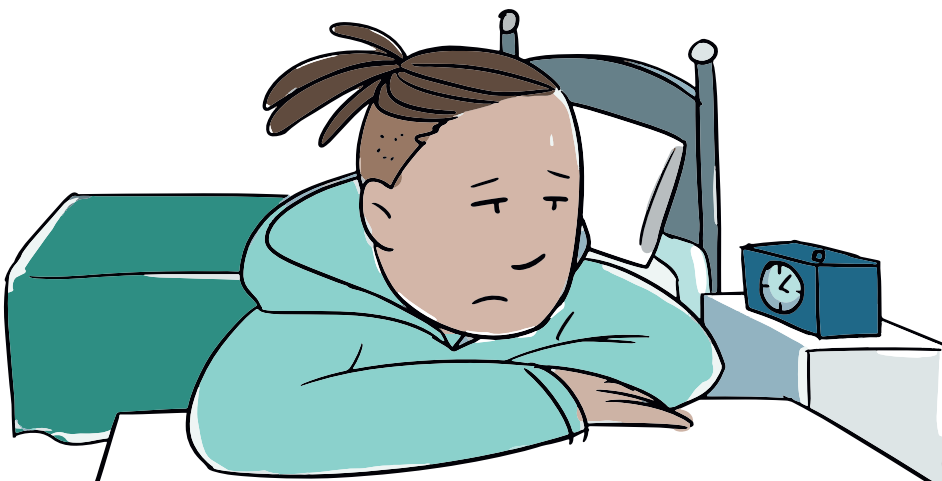
*(OECD, 2021)*

**Moreover and more troubling, "Across 29 samples and 80, 879 youth (globally), the pooled prevalence of clinically elevated depression and anxiety symptoms was 25.2% and 20.5%, respectively.**

Thus, 1 in 4 youth globally are experiencing clinically elevated depression symptoms, while 1 in 5 youth are experiencing clinically elevated anxiety symptoms. A comparison of these findings to pre-pandemic estimates (12.9% for depression and 11.6% for anxiety) suggests that youth mental health difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic has likely doubled".

*(Racine et. al, 2021)*

There is a difference between 'meaningful tension' and chronic stress (manifesting in anxiety, depression and suicide). Meaningful tension is created from the struggle to pursue what matters to a person; it helps people evolve and move from who they are to who they want to become. Chronic stress derives from answering to the meaningless demands of others and having no direction in life.



This increase in mental health difficulties could be that reporting has improved or that youth are more comfortable discussing mental health issues; regardless, the way to respond to these challenges is by assisting young people to connect to their communities, to discover meaning and purpose in their lives, and to generate opportunities for work and further learning.

**Benton and colleagues explain that the situation is even worse for youth who are furthest from opportunity.**

“COVID-19 has had a disproportionate effect on disadvantaged and marginalized families, highlighting disparities for youth linked to discrimination, racism, preexisting inequities, poorer access to care, increased exposure to risk, underrecognizing of illness, poor-quality treatment, limited economic resources, crowded living conditions, and the like.

Also, widely seen across the globe, youth from marginalized and minority groups are also more likely to experience grief and loss of family members to COVID-19 secondary to overrepresentation of the virus in communities that have been historically marginalized”.

The conclusion of their report on ‘Addressing the Global Crisis of Child and Adolescent Mental Health’ states:

“

**The COVID-19 pandemic is a global call to action. We are experiencing a global public health crisis in youth mental health that began long before the pandemic, and we must advocate for implementation of evidence-supported practices that are scalable, expands access to care, and eliminates disparities worldwide.”**

(Benton, et. al, 2021)

**Mental health problems are also tragically reflected in incidents of suicide.** “Prior to the pandemic suicide is the second leading cause of death world-wide among individuals 10-24 years old.”

(Hutchinson, et. al., 2021)

**“Emergency Department visits for suspected suicide attempts among females age 12-17 increased 51% during Feb-March 2021 compared with 2019 according**

to new data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on June 11th 2021.”

(Canady, V. A., 2021)

**“We know that suicide is a complex public health problem. ... We advocate for a community approach to suicide prevention working together in the community with strategies involving youth connectedness, teaching youth and young adults problem-solving skills and strategies.”**

(Gatto, 2021)

**“Forming and maintaining social bonds is a key development task during adolescence.** Prior to the pandemic, evidence had been growing that low social connectedness broadly (i.e., across peers, parents and school) is associated with increased suicidal ideational risk among adolescents.”

(Daho et al., 2018)





“

***There is an emptiness in life that cannot be described, about which one cannot speak. We must pass over it in silence”***

*Simon Brass*

At the core of the ‘why’ of B-Unbound is the recognition of the need for young people to find meaning in their lives and NOT to ‘pass over that reality in silence’ but to recognize and speak about the ‘emptiness’ that so many young people feel and are experiencing and to do something about it WITH youth.

**Affirmed by the work and thinking of the eminent 20th-century Viennese psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1905-1997), B-Unbound**

**understands that the search for meaning is central to the life of every individual.**

**Frankl developed a meaning-centered theory (called logotherapy or ‘healing through meaning’) based on his medical practice involving thousands of suicidal patients. Although it can be utilized as psychotherapy, it is its life philosophy – shared in his internationally best-selling book, Man’s Search for Meaning – that has transformed the lives of millions and inspires the work of B-Unbound.**

Of particular relevance is Frankl’s experience in 1929 when his hometown of Vienna was hit with an epidemic of youth suicides related to school grades. The town was so concerned they funded a network

of counseling centers that Frankl helped organize. Students could discreetly go to the homes and offices of local psychologists free of charge. By 1930, the suicide rate was significantly reduced and Frankl was invited to share the approach with other central European towns experiencing a similar epidemic.

The way Frankl helped the students was by creating or facilitating a radical shift in their viewpoint. Frankl noted that for humans, the source of our wellbeing involves being oriented outside ourselves towards something we believe in or someone we love. The question for the students was not what they expected to get out of life but rather what they were uniquely meant to give to life.

When asked to define “meaning”, Frankl would say, “what is meant.” The underlying concept of meaning is the fact that who we are and what we do matter to the world. Each one of us is irreplaceable. Meaning refers to what is meant and intended specifically for each of us in the distinct situations we are confronted with throughout our lives. Our freedom to decide how and whether we respond to these situations, our innate capacity to perceive the right course of action (conscience) and the responsibility that goes along with these decisions are what make our lives meaningful.

According to Frankl, meaning cannot be created or given to us, it involves a deeply personal discovery process. B-Unbound seeks to facilitate this discovery process.



“

**There is not one big cosmic meaning for all, there is only the meaning we each give to our life, an individual meaning, an individual plot, like an individual novel, a book for each person.”**

Anais Nin

One of the purposes of B-Unbound, according to Pam Roy, is: **“to create an environment for youth-in-community to pursue meaning and to be guided in what they are pulled towards”**. She explained that people are pushed by a purpose and pulled by meaning in their lives, and because purpose is subjective and meaning is individual and to be discovered, B-Unbound does not prescribe meaning or activities for Navigators.

**Co-Navigators and Supportive Adults however can and will assist young people in their search for meaning by “starting with their interests and creating fertile environments for them to pursue them”**. B-Unbound works from the assumption that young people will be most motivated and best

served when they are pursuing their interests with Supportive Adults and mentors who can guide them as they explore their interests and practice skills associated with them, thereby helping them to discover meaning.

**According to Frankl, since each person has to search for their unique meaning in life, it cannot be imposed but has to be discovered.** Therefore, educational programs should be designed as a process of discovery as each person pursues meaning as opposed to a standardized or prescribed set of activities with the same goals for every participant.

Frankl sees the main purpose of education as enabling within learners the ability to make decisions, to take responsibility for their learning and in so doing to become free to acquire the competencies that they need to be the person who they decide they want to be.

Viktor Frankl’s ideas and practice provide the evidence and support for B-Unbound, but it should be noted that B-Unbound is not designed to be therapy for youth, and Navigators are not signing up to discover meaning in their lives. The focus of B-Unbound is to expand

possibilities and facilitate learning opportunities for 14-24 year olds connected their interests within a community of Supportive Adults and peers in the expectation that this will help them pursue meaning in their lives or help them to discover it.

“

**The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.”**

Mark Twain



# HOW

## DOES B-UNBOUND DO IT?

**E**lliot Washor has said that he has known the 'why' of what he does since he was very young; what he is mostly interested in is the HOW.

Mae West was one of the famous dropouts that went to Elliot's high school, Erasmus Hall in Brooklyn, New York. One of her renowned and repeated quotes is:

“**The score never interested me, only the game.**”

Elliot believes this double entendre has relevance to B-Unbound, “because we have a school system that mostly pays attention to the score and not the game. Could it be that Mae West was onto something? Could it be that a key to engaging students in learning is to pay attention to the game and not so much the score?”

Roger Caillois called play, “an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money. Therein lies its utility, as a simulation that exists outside regular life.” Play is voluntary, unserious, unproductive, and uncertain. B-Unbound is voluntary and uncertain; it is based on a

Navigator's interests not on a time bound course or a standardized curriculum. The Navigator is the curriculum and the only limits how far and where their interests take them.

A helpful way to understand the 'how' of B-Unbound is with reference to an essay by Abraham Flexner, founder of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, entitled “The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge.” In 1939 Flexner stated:

“**We cherish the hope that the unobstructed pursuit of useless knowledge will prove to have consequences in the future as in the past. Not for a moment, however, do we defend the Institute on that ground. It exists as a paradise for scholars who, like poets and musicians, have won the right to do as they please and who accomplish most when enabled to do so.**”



B-Unbound cherishes the unbounded pursuit of interest by Navigators enabled to accomplish and discover meaning with Supportive Adults in the paradise (platform) it has created for Navigators who have won the right to do so simply because they are aged 14-24 and are valued as unique and gifted human beings. B-Unbound believes that as they become responsible for their time and direction with the guidance and support of caring adults, they will pursue, learn about, and achieve amazing things.

**Interestingly, when the Institute of Advanced Studies was first set up, like B-Unbound, it had no building** – some scholars were guests of different Halls in Princeton, but, “others work in rooms scattered through the town. ... My own quarters are located in an office building on Nassau Street, where I work among shopkeepers, dentists, lawyers, chiropractors, and groups of Princeton scholars. ... Bricks and mortar are thus quite inessential.” The community is the school.

**When Flexner was asked by one of the scholars “What are my duties?” he responded in a way that any Co-Navigator will be responding to Navigators,** “You have no duties – only opportunities. ... They enjoy precisely the same freedom as the professors. They may work with this or that professor, as they severally arrange; they may work alone, consulting from time to time anyone likely to be helpful. No routine is followed; no lines are drawn between professors, members, or visitors. Princeton students and

professors and Institute members and professors mingle so freely as to be indistinguishable. Learning as such is cultivated. The results to the individual and to society are left to take care of themselves.”

**Navigators in B-Unbound are free to consult with any Supportive Adult who is likely to be helpful,** they may work alone, and no routine is set that has to be followed.

Flexner adds: “The Institute is, from the standpoint of organization, the simplest and least formal thing imaginable.” The organization of B-Unbound is informal, simple, easy to connect with, and smooth to navigate. The digital platform drives B-Unbound where Navigators register, search their interests, find Supportive Adults, connect with fellow Navigators, and communicate with their Co-Navigator.

Anthonette Peña oversees and directs B-Unbound and is supported by three Navigators who serve as Ambassadors. Other BPL

team members participate in the development and operations of the platform including Communications Campaign Manager Isary Vargas, Chief Communications Officer Chris Jackson, and Director of Technology David Berg. In many respects, this organization and platform provide all that is needed for youth to engage in useless pursuits.

**Flexner points out the usefulness of uselessness.** “Out of this useless activity there come discoveries which may well prove of infinitely more importance to the human mind and to the human spirit than the accomplishment of the useful ends for which the schools were founded. The considerations upon which I have touched emphasize - if emphasis were needed - the overwhelming importance of spiritual and intellectual freedom. ... The mere fact that they bring satisfaction to an individual soul bent upon its own purification and elevation is all the justification that they need.”





**“You have to go the way your blood beats. If you don’t live the only life you have, you won’t live some other life, you won’t live any life at all.”**

*James Baldwin*

**Returning to the earlier discussion, the difference between games and traditional schools is that the schools violate all the rules of play,** because schools set themselves up as serious and certain. In the hearts, hands and minds of students, it is often school and academics that become a pure waste of time and energy because school lacks the pull of the game and the environment where players share an emotional connection that allows the participants to go deeper and practice longer.

**It is easy to see that the deeper learning of schools tends to violate all of the principles of play because in school there are pre-determined outcomes that are decided on by the school, not the learners.**

These outcomes include Mastering Core Academic Content, Thinking Critically, Solving Complex Problems, and Developing Academic Minds. There is an assumption by schools that children do not know how to learn and have to be instructed in learning how to learn. The opposite is observable almost immediately even amongst the youngest of children when they are playing games or just learning naturally for that matter.

**Andrea Kuszewski, amongst other researchers, points out that there are five ways to increase fluid intelligence** - discovering new things, thinking creatively, challenging yourself, doing things the hard way and networking/ socializing. All five of these ways largely describe the ‘how’ of B-Unbound.

Significantly, like B-Unbound, all games always involve interaction – with things, with people or both. Chris Crawford in *The Art of Game Design* makes it clear that the crucial element to any game is interaction. Schools generally do not provide the crucial element of interaction to make learning meaningful.

BPL and B-Unbound are built on the centrality of relationships, the need to play (practice), and enabling learners to pursue their interests, discover meaning and do what is meaningful to them.



**“My grandmother wanted me to have an education, so she kept me out of school.”**

*Margaret Mead*

If more justification is needed for B-Unbound, there is the reality that, “In the USA in 2019, there were 2 million status dropouts between the ages of 16 and 24” (status dropouts are 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential).

*nces.ed.gov/fastfacts*

For those students who do graduate from high school and go to college, there are clearly other issues that can affect them and that highlight the need for an initiative such as B-Unbound as the following graphic demonstrates.

## College Dropout Rates

In the United States, the overall dropout rate for undergraduate college students is

**40%**

and 40% of college dropouts have a 3.0 GPA or higher.

The cost of college tuition has continuously increased, skyrocketing by

**1,375%**  
since 1978.

Nearly

**40%**

of college graduates end up working jobs that don't require degrees, and even more are working in fields that are not what they went to school for.

**30%**

of the dropout rate comes from college freshman dropping out before their sophomore year.

Only  
**5%**

of students in 2-year colleges graduate on time with a 2-year degree.

The cost of dropping out of college measured by lost earnings is

**\$3.8 billion**

in a single year.



[educationdata.org/college-dropout-rates#](https://educationdata.org/college-dropout-rates#)

**BPL was created to transform schooling and to redress the serious inequities in the educational system.** The successful principles, activities, practices, and lessons of BPL over the years paved the way for the HOW of B-Unbound. BPL's longitudinal success with learners by reimagining K-16 education and scaling innovative initiatives has resulted in an extensive international network serving approximately 10,000 students in 28 states and an additional 75+ schools in 13 countries with upwards of 30,000 students.

**Even more significant is the success and life transforming activities of its students.** In the findings of longitudinal research by Arnold and Mihut 2020 on "Post-secondary Outcomes of Innovative High Schools," BPL graduates in the USA were equally likely to enroll in college no matter their race, gender, or parents' level of education. This finding is unprecedented, and no other network of schools can make this claim.

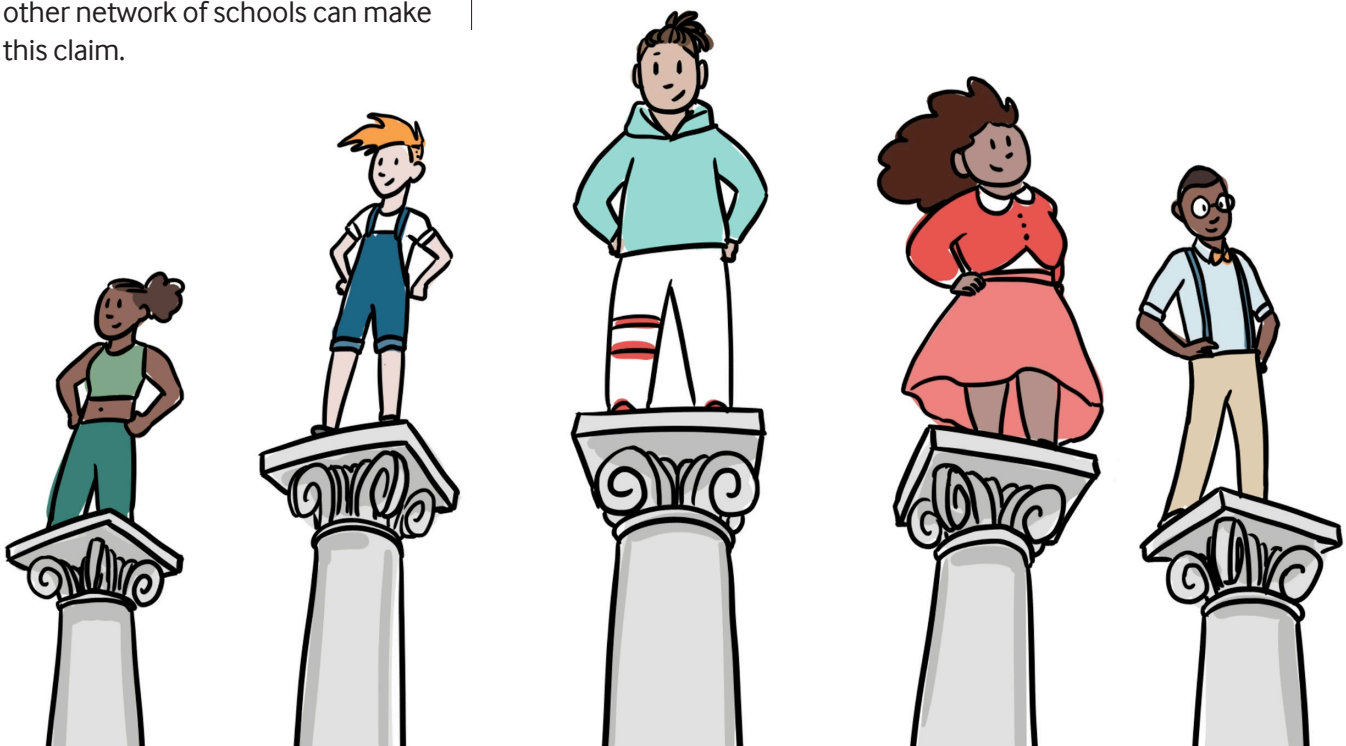
**BPL's vision is that all learners live lives of their own design, supported by caring mentors and equitable opportunities to achieve their greatest potential.**

In BPL schools, students are actively invested in their learning and are challenged to address real-world problems with a supportive community of educators, professionals, and family members.

**Both Elliot and Pam recognize that B-Unbound faces a number of challenges to reach and engage youth, to expand and scale up, and to sustain funding support over the long term.** Pam identified some of the challenges as "fear of change, people staying with the familiar, the push back of systems, and the difficulties in American society to build community." Both believe that B-Unbound expands possibilities but "it has to happen organically" and the program and platform "have to inspire change because change does

not come about by demanding it." Elliot is convinced that, "B-Unbound has the potential to reach loads of people. School is limited but B-Unbound is unbound."

As with BPL, B-Unbound is established and primed to continue to MINGLE WITH, MUDDLE THROUGH and MATTER TO young people, so they can pursue their potential, follow their interests, and design lives of meaning.



# REFERENCES



Arnold, K. and Mihut, G. (2020)  
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/016146812012200803>

Benton TD, Boyd RC, Njoroge WF. Addressing the Global Crisis of Child and Adolescent Mental Health. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2021;175(11):1108–1110.

<https://www.bigpicture.org/https://www.b-unbound.org/>

Caillois, R. (1961) *Man, play, and games.* 2121 New York: Free Press of Glencoe.

Canady, V. A., (October, 2021) <https://doi.org/10.1002/mhw.33002>

Crawford, C. (1997) [https://www.digitpress.com/library/books/book\\_art\\_of\\_computer\\_game\\_design.pdf](https://www.digitpress.com/library/books/book_art_of_computer_game_design.pdf)

<https://educationdata.org/college-dropout-rates>

Flexner, A. (1939) <https://harpers.org/archive/1939/10/the-usefulness-of-useless-knowledge/>

Frankl, V. (1959) *Man's Search for Meaning.* New York: Random House.

Frankl, V. (1955) *The Doctor and the Soul.* New York: Random House.

Hagger, M.S. and Chatzisarantis, N. (2016) "The Trans-Contextual Model of Autonomous Motivation in Education: Conceptual and Empirical Issues and Meta-Analysis" *Review of Educational Research* 86 (2).

Hutchinson, E. A., Sequeira, S. L., Silk, J. S., Jones, N. P., Oppenheimer, C., Scott, L., and Ladouceur, C. D. Peer Connectedness and Pre-Existing Social Reward Processing Predicts U.S. Adolescent Girls' Suicidal Ideation During COVID-19. *Journal of Research on Adolescent*, 31(3), 703-716.

<http://oecdinsights.org/2016/04/27/the-trillion-dollar-ocean/>.

Kuszewski, Andrea. "You can increase your intelligence: 5 ways to maximize your cognitive potential." *Scientific American* 7 (2011): 1-8.

Lin, L. *Exploring Collaborative Learning.* 2015

<https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/>

OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training (2015) *Skills Beyond School: Synthesis Report.* Geneva: OECD.

OECD (2021) [https://www.academia.edu/4644449/The\\_Youth\\_Employment\\_Crisis](https://www.academia.edu/4644449/The_Youth_Employment_Crisis)

Racine N, McArthur BA, Cooke JE, Eirich R, Zhu J, Madigan S. Global Prevalence of Depressive and Anxiety Symptoms in Children and Adolescents During COVID-19: A Meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2021;175(11):1142–1150.

Ryan, R.M. and Deci, E.L. (2017) *Self-determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness.* New York: The Guilford Press.

Ryan, R.M. and Deci, E.L. (2000) "Self-determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development and Well-being" *American Psychology*, 55 (1).

Sarason, S. "Some features of a flawed educational system," *Daedalus*, Vol. 27, 1998.

<https://straightupimpact.com/>

<https://viktorfranklamerica.com/>

Vygotsky, L. *Thought and Language*, 2nd ed., MIT, 1986.

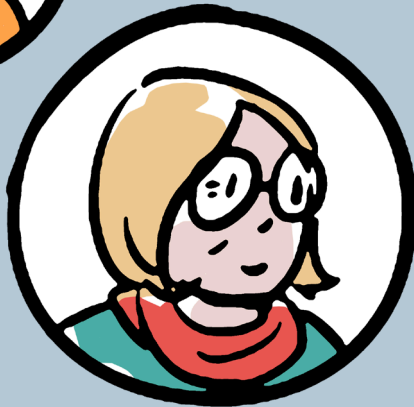
Wang, J., Liu, W.C., Kee, W.H. and Chian, L.K. (2019) "Competence, Autonomy, and Relatedness in the Classroom" *Heliyon* 5 (7).

Washor, E. and Mojkowski, C. (2013) *Leaving to Learn: How out-of-school learning increases student engagement and reduces dropout rates.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.





Equipping  
Youth with  
Tools to  
**TAKE  
ACTION**



---

**Scott Boldt**  
June 2022