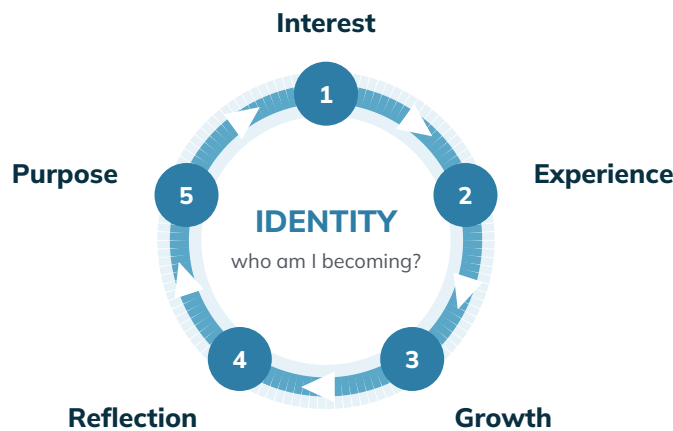




HELPING STUDENTS FIND DIRECTION

A five-phase model, grounded in research

Helping a student find real direction is not one intervention — it is a positive feedback loop, and identity sits at its center. Interest, experience, growth, reflection, and purpose are the ongoing process by which a young person builds a sense of who they are, what they believe, and what they are working toward — then revises it, continuously, as the loop repeats.



WHY IDENTITY SITS AT THE CENTER

Erik Erikson framed adolescence as the stage centered on one question: who am I becoming? (Erikson, 1968). Psychologist James Marcia sharpened that for a classroom: identity forms through exploring and then committing — examined across two domains in particular, occupation and ideology: what someone pursues, and what they come to believe (Marcia, 1966). Explore and commit, and a student reaches a self-authored identity; commit without exploring and they inherit one instead; explore without ever committing and the search never ends. A student's passions and sense of future self are not something they either have or do not — they are what this loop is for.

1. Interest

A spark — attention catches on something before any commitment has been made.

2. Experience

The student engages with it firsthand, and interest either takes hold or fades.

3. Growth

Real difficulty shows up — and whether the student pushes through it depends on how it gets interpreted.

4. Reflection

Experience turns into self-knowledge — the raw material identity is actually built from.

5. Purpose

A stable, self-authored identity that connects to something beyond the student.

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HELPING STUDENTS FIND DIRECTION

Continued



1. Interest

Interest is a spark — attention catches on something before any commitment has been made, and long before it has become part of who a student is.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

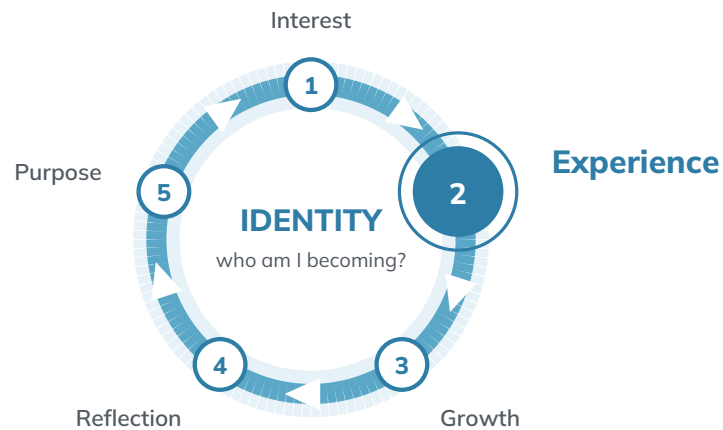
Educational psychologists Suzanne Hidi and K. Ann Renninger found interest develops in four stages: a triggered spark, a maintained spark, an emerging pull toward the topic, and eventually a well-developed interest that has become part of how a student sees themselves (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). Most classroom exposure — a career day, a single unit — only reaches the first stage.

IN YOUR CLASSROOM

- Give students many small, low-stakes sparks rather than one big unit.
- Let a spark be revisited, not treated as "covered" after one exposure.
- Notice when a student returns to something unprompted — that is the real signal.

LEADS TO

A spark only becomes real once a student tries it firsthand.



2. Experience

Experience is where a student actually engages with the thing — a first test of whether it belongs in who they're becoming, not just something they're curious about.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan found firsthand engagement sustains itself only when three needs are met: autonomy (the choice feels genuinely theirs), competence (they can see themselves making progress), and relatedness (they feel connected to the people around the work) (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

IN YOUR CLASSROOM

- Let students choose what to explore and how deep to go.
- Give feedback specific enough to act on, not just praise or correction.
- Connect the experience to real people already doing the work.

LEADS TO

What happens when the experience gets hard is the next phase.



HELPING STUDENTS FIND DIRECTION

Continued



3. Growth

Growth is what happens when a student hits real difficulty — and whether they push through it decides whether this becomes part of their identity, or gets filed away as "not me."

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Carol Dweck's research on "growth mindset" shows real but modest effects, concentrated among students who are already struggling, and dependent on a classroom culture that reinforces it (Yeager et al., 2019). Praising effort and strategy builds more durable persistence than praising intelligence, which can make students more fragile after failure (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Separately, Gregory Walton and Geoffrey Cohen found that simply normalizing the fact that everyone doubts they belong at first — and that the doubt fades — measurably improved students' persistence and well-being for years afterward (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

IN YOUR CLASSROOM

- Praise the strategy and the specific improvement, not the trait.
- Name self-doubt about "fitting" somewhere as normal, not a verdict.
- Expect this to matter most for students who are currently struggling.

LEADS TO

Getting through difficulty is only useful once a student steps back to make sense of it.



HELPING STUDENTS FIND DIRECTION

Continued



4. Reflection

Reflection is where experience turns into self-knowledge — where a student starts to picture who they might actually become.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Psychologists Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius found that vivid, specific images of a future self — a "possible self" — are among the strongest predictors of present motivation (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The pull is strongest when that future self feels like an extension of who a student already is, not a distant abstraction. A school-based intervention that helped students link possible selves to concrete strategies measurably improved bonding, attendance, and behavior over the following year (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006).

IN YOUR CLASSROOM

- Ask students to describe, specifically, what a future version of themselves would be doing.
- Pair exposure with concrete detail — pay, daily work, path — not vague encouragement.
- Show a wide range of people in a field, not just the most visible examples.

LEADS TO

A clear enough picture of the future is what purpose is actually made of.



HELPING STUDENTS FIND DIRECTION

Continued



5. Purpose

Purpose is where the loop closes — a stable, self-relevant sense of direction that connects to something beyond the student, and feeds back into what they get curious about next.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Stanford psychologist William Damon's research found that only about one in five adolescents can articulate a clear sense of purpose, while roughly one in four are what he calls "rudderless" (Damon, 2008). Purpose does not respond well to being handed as a goal — Damon's research found it tends to emerge when young people are asked genuine questions about what they care about, and given real room to reflect on the answer. This is close to what psychologist James Marcia called identity achievement: a commitment that follows real exploration, rather than an answer inherited from someone else (Marcia, 1966).

IN YOUR CLASSROOM

- Ask real questions — "why does this interest you?" — rather than assigning a goal.
- Give students something to actually write or say, not just think.
- Treat purpose as something that develops, not something a student should already have.

FEEDS BACK

This is not a finish line — purpose reshapes what a student is curious about next, and the loop begins again.