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Finnish and Iranian teachers' views on their competence to teach purpose

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Finnish ($n = 464$) and Iranian ($n = 556$) teachers' views on their competence to teach purpose. 'Purpose' is defined as a stable intention to accomplish something that is both meaningful to the self and of consequence beyond the self over time. The study revealed that all Iranian teachers evaluated their competence for teaching purpose as being high, regardless of the subject taught. In contrast, among Finnish teachers, there were statistically significant relationships between the subject taught and teachers' self-perceptions: religious education seemed to provide a subject in which Finnish teachers can guide students to consider explicitly their purpose in life and plans for the future, while science and mathematics appeared to offer the most challenging contexts for teaching purpose. Hence, the results challenge Finnish in-service and pre-service teacher education programmes to create new approaches and new cultures for mathematics and science education, which intentionally take into account the moral aspects of teaching. Moreover, regression analysis revealed that teachers' ethical sensitivity predicted their views on teaching purpose in both countries. Results indicate that improving teachers' ethical sensitivity skills in teacher education programmes could provide a significant path for supporting teachers' competence in teaching purpose.

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Purpose in life; ethical sensitivity; teaching; teacher; Finland; Iran

Introduction

It is our responsibility as adults in this uncertain, confusing, and increasingly cynical time to provide the younger generation with far-horizon guidance. (Damon 2008, 118)

The aim of this study was to examine Finnish and Iranian teachers' ($n = 1020$) views of their competence to teach purpose. The notion of 'purpose' can be seen as the most profound phenomenon of human experience, since it gives reasons not only for acting ethically, but also for living (Bronk 2014; Moran 2009). Today, a general lack of purpose is associated with the stress that people are experiencing and with apathy in the young (Damon 2008).

Research on the subject of purpose peaked for the first time in the 1960s, but it was not until the early 2000s that interest on purpose emerged in connection with the positive

psychology movement. So far, recent theories of positive psychology have all found purpose to be the core component of human well-being and positive youth development (Bronk 2014). However, teaching purpose in school and in teacher education programmes has not been extensively studied as yet, while instructional approaches to purpose studies have been neglected (Koshy and Mariano 2011; Mariano 2014). Thus, the main application of the study is to integrate teaching purpose into teacher education programmes as well as into teacher professional development.

In this study, purpose is defined as ‘a stable intention to accomplish something that is both meaningful to the self and of consequence beyond the self over time’ (Damon, Menon, and Bronk 2003, 212). Within this theoretical framework, education for a purpose is based on the following assumptions: purpose can be taught, everyone can find a purpose (Benson 2006; Damon 2008) and teachers play a crucial role in development of youth purpose (Bundick and Tirri 2014; Damon 2009; Mariano et al. 2011).

According to Koshy and Mariano (2011), there are two different approaches to teaching purpose in a school environment: long-term engagement with purpose-related curricula and one-lesson or one-classroom approaches. The first approach means that instruction in purpose is integrated into all teaching and the teachers’ task is to assist students in finding the relevance of the subject (Kansanen and Meri 1999; Tirri and Kuusisto *Forthcoming*; Ubani 2013). The second approach (the one-lesson or one-classroom approach) refers to classes in which purpose itself is the subject or content of the lesson. This approach is more natural in subjects such as religious education, ethics or philosophy in which religions, worldviews, values, beliefs, ethics and life questions are studied per se and purpose and meaning in life is considered explicitly (Niemi 1987; Ubani 2013).

At least four elements have been identified in previous studies as important in teaching purpose. First, students benefit if they are asked about, guided to reflect on and talk explicitly about, their purposes in life, their core values, and their most important life goals (Bundick 2011). By *discussing purpose*, a teacher may set an example and serve as a role model of an adult who is able to identify, negotiate and verbalise profound and fundamental questions about life (Malin et al. 2014, 195). Furthermore, purpose discussions seem to have lasting psychological advantages, such as increased goal directedness and life satisfaction (Bundick 2011). Second, when a teacher promotes and *teaches future planning* and general future orientation in students, the teacher is helping the students build foundational skills in purpose, namely, goal-setting and intentional engagement (Bundick and Tirri 2014; Nurmi 1991). Third, purpose development is enhanced by *teaching consequences*. Teachers should especially ask students to consider consequences of their actions, thereby guiding the students to develop reflective skills, as well as empathic and pro-social capabilities (Damon 2008). Fourth, teachers need to *teach importance* by guiding students to see the relevance of school in their lives, so that schooling is appreciated and seen as important (Damon 2009; Ubani 2013). Thus, teachers spend time highlighting and explaining to students why school and its tasks are significant and what is the meaning of the school and the subjects studied (see also Tirri and Kuusisto *Forthcoming*).

Based on the above-mentioned findings, Bundick and Tirri (2014) developed an instrument with which they studied US and Finnish student perceptions of teacher support. The results showed that teachers play an important role in fostering purpose in secondary school students and also that there were important cultural differences in the way purpose is usually fostered (Bundick and Tirri 2014, 158). In the USA, teachers’ general support was associated

with *teaching future planning*, *consequences of actions* and the *importance of schooling*, of which the last, teaching importance, was related to purpose identification, goal-directedness and beyond-the-self orientation; in other words, dimensions of the definition by Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003). In Finland general teacher support was associated with *teaching consequences* and *teaching importance*, but not with teaching future planning. However, interestingly, perceived *teaching for planfulness* (that is, future planning) was the element that supported all three dimensions of purpose among Finnish students. Another remarkable aspect of Bundick and Tirri's (2014) study is that the element of *discussing purpose* was not included in either the USA or the Finnish model, which could indicate that purpose in life may not be addressed explicitly by American or Finnish teachers.

This study utilises Bundick and Tirri's (2014) instrument to explore teachers' views on how they support students' purpose in their classrooms. It investigates and compares self-estimations of teachers from a Western country, Finland, and an eastern country, Iran.

Teaching as a moral profession in Finland and Iran

Finland and Iran provide intriguing contexts for this study. In both cultures, the nurturing of virtues and concern with the quality of life are respected (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010). Hence, teaching is valued and is viewed as a moral profession (Gholami, Kuusisto, and Tirri 2015). In Finland, every teacher is understood to be a holistic and moral educator (Tirri 2011, 2012). Similarly, in Iran the moral competencies of teachers are highlighted (Molaiinejad and Zakavati 2008).

Empirical studies exploring Finnish and Iranian teachers' ethical sensitivity have shown that teachers from both countries estimated their ethical sensitivity to be high, indicating that they feel competent to recognise ethical problems and to visualise alternative courses of action in response to ethical situations (Gholami and Tirri 2012; Kuusisto, Tirri, and Rissanen 2012). Further, path analysis revealed that in both groups 'caring about others' was identified as a core element and a culture-invariant aspect of ethical sensitivity (Gholami, Kuusisto, and Tirri 2015). However, cultural differences were evident in the patterns with which Iranian and Finnish teachers construct and understand the prerequisites for caring. In the Finnish case, 'taking the perspective of others' was a strong predictor of 'caring about others' and had a direct effect on this dimension, whereas this was not the situation with the Iranian teachers (*ibid.*). The results indicate that in a culture with small power distances between pupils and teachers and individualistic values such as Finland's (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010), teachers respect the perspective of others in social interactions. This is in line with Finnish teacher education, which aims to educate autonomous professionals who are able to create a didactic relationship with their students, meaning that a teacher knows their students and is able to provide support and guidance that takes into account the students' individual development (Kansanen and Meri 1999). In contrast, in Iran, which has a large power distance between its teachers and students and a collectivistic culture, accepting collective Islamic values and meanings seems to be a priority in social interactions (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010). As a result, in many social conflicts 'individual agency' and people with secular values are ignored, while the 'collective structure' and individuals having a sacred orientation are acknowledged (Gholami, Kuusisto, and Tirri 2015). In line with these findings, this study investigates how such high ethical sensitivity and moral caring in both contexts is represented in teachers' competence to teach purpose. Thus, the research questions of this study are as follows:

- (1) How do Finnish and Iranian teachers perceive their competence for teaching purpose?
- (2) Are there differences between Finnish and Iranian teachers' views whenever their subject of instruction is taken into account?
- (3) To what extent does ethical sensitivity predict teaching purpose in each country?

By answering these questions, the present investigation provides information about teachers' views on their competence to teach purpose in two different cultures. Further, this study illustrates which aspects in purpose teaching can be identified as current challenges that need to be addressed in teacher education programmes.

Research contexts: Finnish and Iranian educational systems

Educational policies in Finland and Iran

From the historical point of view, both in Finland and Iran, religion, specifically Lutheran Christianity and Islam respectively, has been intertwined with the development of educational systems (Hedayati et al. 2016; Tirri 2014). However, the role of religion in educational policies has been quite the reverse, as shown in Table 1.

The basis for the modern Iranian educational system was created during the Qajar Dynasty (1794–1925), after which the Pahlavi Dynasty modernised, secularised and Westernised education during the years 1925–1979. This process changed dramatically in 1979 when the Cultural Revolution induced the Islamisation of Iranian society (Cheng and Beigi 2012; Hedayati et al. 2016). As a result, all educational elements and contents that were identified as secular or Western were removed and replaced with Islamic views. Accordingly, the internalisation of Islamic values and ethics was placed among the core aims and content of all education, as well as being among the main professional requirements for teachers, regardless of the level or the subject taught (Hedayati et al. 2016). This also meant that different cultural, ethnic, religious and language backgrounds were intentionally disregarded, as the aim of the Iranian school system was to provide one specific model for educating Islamic Iranian citizens (Cheng and Beigi 2012; Hedayati et al. 2016; Kheiltash and Rust 2009). Islamisation also mandated the educational decision-making process to become highly centralised and was firmly guided by the Iranian Ministry of Education. For example, the Ministry selects the student teachers and employs graduated teachers (Hedayati et al. 2016). Governmentally supervised textbooks are considered the main medium for delivering standardised instruction, as the contents of textbooks create the exclusive basis for national examinations at the conclusion of each level of basic education (Soltan Zadeh 2012).

The year 2010 marked the beginning of a decade of renewal in the Iranian educational system: in 2012 the Ministry specified for the first time in written form the theoretical foundation of Iranian education by publishing *Theoretical Foundation of Fundamental Transformation in the Educational System of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (hereafter IRI) (Hedayati et al. 2016; TFFTES 2012). This document included five sections: (1) Philosophy of Education in IRI, (2) Philosophy of Official and General Education in IRI, (3) Guide for the Educational System in the IRI, (4) Fundamental Transformation in the Educational System of the IRI and (5) the National Curriculum. The basic education system or K-12 was declared to be comprised of primary school (grades 1–6, from the age of six), lower secondary school (grades 7–9), and upper secondary school with academic and vocational sections (grades 10–12).

Table 1. Periods of educational policies in Iran and Finland.

	Iran	Finland
The beginnings	<p>SECULAR EDUCATION Qajar Dynasty: basis for modern Iranian educational system created (1794–1925)</p> <p>Persian constitutional revolution (1905–1907), establishment of National Parliament, primary school became compulsory, teacher education and sending students to European universities approved</p> <p>Pahlavi Dynasty: modernisation, secularisation and Westernisation of educational system (1925–1979), shift from a European system to the American one</p>	<p>CHRISTIAN EDUCATION Formation of the education system in Sweden–Finland (–1808), Establishment of a university (1640); First curriculum (1649)</p> <p>Building the nation with <i>Bildung</i> Finland as an Autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire (1808/1809–1917), first professor in education (1852), secondary teacher education moved to universities, national board of education and matriculation examination (est. 1860s)</p> <p>The independent nation-state (1917)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School for all (1921) • Religious education at the core of the curriculum • Teachers as religious and moral examples ‘candles of the nation’
1970	<p>ISLAMISATION OF EDUCATION Islamic Cultural Revolution (1979) Building the nation with <i>Pure Life</i> Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution to ‘transform universities, schools, cultural and art centres based on Islamic criterion and to spread and reinforce them for educating professors, teachers and mentors who believe in Islam and the independence of the country’ (Goals and tasks of Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution 1985)</p>	<p>SECULARISATION OF EDUCATION Equality as a core value Basic education via comprehensive school (1968/1972): primary school (grades 1–6, from the age of 7), lower secondary school (grades 7–9). Voluntary education: upper secondary school (academic orientation, 3 years), vocational school (2–3 years), higher education Class teacher education moved to universities (1974), master’s degree minimum for class and subject teachers</p>
1980–1990	<p>CENTRALISATION OF EDUCATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islamic values as the main principle of schooling and teacher education • Ministry of Education as supervisor 	<p>DECENTRALISATION OF EDUCATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individualism and equality as main principles • National Core Curriculum provides general guidelines for municipalities and schools • Teachers’ professional ethical code (1998)
2000–2010	<p>CODIFICATION OF ISLAMISATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Theoretical Foundation of Fundamental Transformation in the Educational System of the Islamic Republic of Iran</i> (2012) • Basic education: primary school (grades 1–6, from the age of 6), lower secondary school (grades 7–9), upper secondary school (grades 10–12) • Uniform teacher education: Farhangian University, bachelor’s degree minimum for class teachers, master’s for subject teachers 	<p>TOWARDS GLOBALLY ORIENTATED ETHICAL CITIZENSHIP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finnish youth’s success in PISA studies (2004, 2011) • Research-based teacher education • National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2014) to be implemented in autumn 2016

Moreover, the minimum degree required for teaching in primary school became a bachelor’s degree and in secondary school, a master’s. However, for schools in remote and deprived places, primary school teachers with associate degrees and secondary school teachers with bachelor’s degrees could be employed as long as they improved their degree qualifications by participating in in-service education (Hedayati et al. 2016). Furthermore, in 2012 Farhangian University (a teacher education university) was established to combine all previously separate and independent teacher education units into one umbrella organisation supervised by the ministry (Hedayati et al. 2016).

Initially, the Finnish educational system had been formed by religious institutions, first the Catholic Church and later the Evangelical Lutheran Church. As early as the 1500s, literacy was a requirement for marriage within the Lutheran Church (Niemi 2012, 21). By the late

1800s, Finnish society began to take responsibility for basic education, and several educational institutions were established; secondary school teacher education was moved to universities, class teacher education began in teacher training colleges, a national board of education was created and a national matriculation examination was composed (Tirri 2014; Uljens and Nyman 2013). In 1921, education for all children became compulsory. Besides teaching skills in reading, writing and calculating, Christianity and practical skills such as handicrafts were the foundations of basic education and also of class teacher education (Tirri 2014). Furthermore, teachers were understood to be religious and moral examples, 'candles of the nation' (Niemi 2012). In the 1960s and 1970s, increasing secularisation and the rise of social democratic values of equality led to the establishment of a nine-year comprehensive school, which replaced the previous parallel school system. Thus, Finnish basic education came to consist of primary school (grades 1–6, from the age of 7) and lower secondary school (grades 7–9, with an optional 10th grade). The Finnish government's principle of 'Equal opportunity and high-quality education for all' meant that education at all levels, including basic education, upper secondary school education (with academic or vocational sections) and higher education became free of charge to every pupil (Tirri and Kuusisto 2013). Furthermore, the education of teachers was strengthened when class teacher education was moved to the universities in 1974, and both class teachers and subject teachers were required to earn a master's degree (Tirri 2014).

In the 1990s, individualism and decentralisation became the prevailing ideas in the Finnish educational system (see Table 1). The role of the national curriculum changed in favour of providing the value basis and general guidelines for municipalities and schools, which in turn create their own specialised curricula with the assistance of teachers (Tirri and Kuusisto 2013). Teachers' pedagogical freedom was emphasised in choosing class content and methods as long as the choices were in line with the National Core Curriculum (Kansanen et al. 2000). Also the Finnish professional ethics code for teachers formalised in 1998 stressed the worth of individuals and the principle of accepting learners as unique, as well as the importance of respecting their rights (*Teacher's Professional Ethics And Ethical Principles's* 2010). Thus, individualism meant that pupils' personal characteristics, needs and interests, as well as the languages and religions of minorities were considered in the National Core Curriculum and thereby in teaching more than in previous decades (Holm and Londen 2010; Poulter 2013). For example, in Finnish schools, language instruction by a native speaker is provided in over 50 languages for students with an immigrant background (*Finnish National Board of Education* 2013), and religious education is arranged in 13 different religions or denominations (*Finnish National Board of Education* 2006). However, at the national level, 92% of basic education students attend religious education classes in Lutheranism, 3% attend classes in other religions and 5% choose secular ethics (Kumpulainen 2015, 22).

Bildung and Pure Life as the ultimate goals of education in Finland and Iran

In Finland and Iran, the ultimate goals of education are *Bildung* (Uljens and Nyman 2013) and *Pure Life* (Hedayati et al. 2016), respectively (see Table 1), topics that offer strong ethical perspectives on teaching, studying and learning. The concept of *Bildung* stems from the German tradition of *Didactics*, meaning 'grasping as much of the world as possible' and 'contributing to humankind' by developing one's unique self (Hopmann 2007, 115). *Bildung*, in other words, requires a passionate search for continuous individual growth and the ability

to engage in the critical development of society in order to actualise the highest ideals. *Bildung* has been identified as a key component of Finnish education and nation building since the nineteenth century (Uljens and Nyman 2013). Over the years, the interpretation of *Bildung* has gradually changed from religiously focused obedience to ethically responsible citizenship (Poulter 2013; Uljens and Nyman 2013). The current understanding of *Bildung* has been embodied in the Basic Education Act (628/1998, Section 2) and the *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education* (2014), which define the main goals of education as follows: (1) to support students' holistic growth as human beings and ethically responsible citizens, (2) to provide necessary knowledge and skills and (3) to advance equality and lifelong learning.

In the Iranian context, *Pure Life*, one of the essential concepts in Islamic texts, creates the basis for all education (Hedayati et al. 2016). TFFTES (2012) says, 'the ultimate aim of education in an Islamic society is to prepare students individually and collectively for conscious voluntary pure life in all dimensions', these being religious and moral, physical, social and political, economic and professional, scientific and technological, aesthetic and artistic (Hedayati et al. 2016). *Pure Life* means serving Islam holistically in a categorical and collective way (Kheiltash and Rust 2009; Mehran 2003); in other words, Iranian education aims to educate 'a new generation of pious Muslims with a strong sense of an Iranian-Islamic identity' (Mehran 2003, 326; see also Paivandi 2012).

In both countries, the aims of education create a strong ethical ethos in which every teacher, regardless of school level or subject of instruction, is seen as being morally responsible for the students' holistic growth and well-being. These are courses of conduct that are not self-evident in many countries, such as the Netherlands (Kuusisto et al. Forthcoming). However, the role of religion differs considerably in the Finnish and Iranian educational systems. In Iran, education is strongly religiously orientated, and religion and religious education are explicitly integrated into all teaching (Hedayati et al. 2016). In contrast, in Finnish schools the holistic role of religion has faded, and religions and worldviews are taught mainly in religious education classes.

The above-described theoretical framework, educational contexts and ultimate goals show that, on the one hand, teaching is seen as a moral profession in both Iran and Finland, and helping students find meaning in their academic and personal lives can be considered a moral dimension of teaching. However, on the other hand, the educational philosophies of the educational systems differ in these countries, and thus, Finnish and Iranian teachers are most likely to deal with teaching purpose in different ways. In other words, teachers in Finland and Iran provide distinct horizons for students to follow in school. This study gains insight into how such different contexts are associated with teachers' views on teaching purpose.

Data and methods

Participants

The Finnish data were gathered from teachers working in comprehensive school or upper secondary school. Principals ($n = 370$) were approached via email in seven Finnish cities (Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa in the Helsinki metropolitan area; Tampere and Jyväskylä in central Finland; Joensuu in eastern Finland; and Oulu in northern Finland). They were asked to forward an invitation to their teachers to complete an electronic version of a questionnaire.

Only 11 principals in 3 different cities informed us that they had in fact forwarded the questionnaire. However, a few principals from four other cities also informed their teachers about the study, because the 83 teachers (18%) who offered their email addresses as a sign of willingness to be interviewed represented all 7 cities. The Finnish sample consisted of practising teachers ($n = 464$) who worked as primary school class teachers ($n = 166$), as well as lower and upper secondary school subject teachers ($n = 298$). The latter taught science ($n = 64$), social science ($n = 34$), languages ($n = 64$), religious education ($n = 38$) and other subjects (e.g. art, home economics, crafts and physical education) ($n = 98$). The majority were females ($n = 350$), with a minority of males ($n = 114$). The Finnish sample included teachers with the following years of experience: 1–4 ($n = 61$), 5–9 ($n = 90$), 10–14 ($n = 74$), 15–19 ($n = 62$) and over 20 ($n = 177$).

The Iranian data were collected from teachers in Kurdistan at three levels of K-12 education. Kurdistan is one of 31 provinces in Iran and has about one and half million inhabitants, the majority of whom have a Kurdish ethnic background. A total of 600 primary, middle and high-school teachers were asked to participate in our study on a voluntary basis. One of the researchers (of Iranian origin) was granted permission to visit the site to collect the data. The researcher personally visited each of the 21 schools that volunteered to participate in the study and delivered hard copies of the same questionnaire that was given to Finnish teachers, albeit in translation into Farsi. These questionnaires were given to the principal of each school for distribution to the Iranian teachers. When the questionnaires were returned, it was found that some 44 cases had significant missing data, and these were excluded from our analysis. The final Iranian sample ($n = 556$) consisted of males ($n = 332$) and females ($n = 224$) who represented teaching experiences of 1–4 years ($n = 61$), 5–9 years ($n = 109$), 10–14 years ($n = 147$), 15–19 years ($n = 128$) and over 20 years ($n = 133$). The Iranian teachers worked as primary school class teachers ($n = 125$), as well as lower and upper secondary school subject teachers ($n = 431$). The latter taught science ($n = 101$), social science ($n = 85$), languages ($n = 66$), religious education ($n = 69$) and other subjects (e.g. art, physical education) ($n = 110$).

Instruments

Teachers' evaluations of their competence to teach purpose was assessed with a Bundick and Tirri (2014) instrument, which is an operationalisation of characteristics of predictors of purpose development. The original items measured students' perceptions of teacher competencies for purpose, and they were modified to fit the teachers' self-ratings (Table 2). Items were responded to on five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The reliability value of the four items indicated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .716$). Four core dimensions of the Ethical Sensitivity Scale Questionnaire (Gholami, Kuusisto, and Tirri 2015; Tirri and Nokelainen 2011) were utilised as a predictors of teachers' competence to teach purpose. The dimensions were: (1) *taking the perspective of others* (TPO, $\alpha = .724$), (2) *caring by connecting with others* (CCO, $\alpha = .724$), (3) *reading ethical issues* (REI, $\alpha = .599$) and (4) *identifying the consequences of action and options* (ICAO, $\alpha = .724$). Each included four items and were evaluated on a Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Sample items include 'I also get along with people who do not agree with me'; 'I take care of the well-being of others and try to improve it'; 'I notice that there are ethical issues involved in human interaction'; and 'I contemplate the consequences of my actions when making ethical decisions'.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of Finnish and Iranian teachers' perceptions of their competence to teach purpose.

Dimension and items	M (SD)	Finnish $n = 464$	Iranian $n = 556$	$t(df), p$
		M (SD)	M (SD)	
Competence to teach purpose In my current school...	4.24 (.53)	4.15 (.53)	4.31 (.53)	-4.859(1018), .000
• I guide my students to reflect on their purpose in life	4.15 (.86)	3.83 (.91)	4.42 (.71)	-11.387(862.513), .000
• I teach my students how to plan for the future	4.26 (.79)	4.02 (.78)	4.46 (.74)	-9.271(969.718), .000
• I teach why a lesson or task or experience is important	4.24 (.69)	4.32 (.65)	4.18 (.71)	3.235(1018), .001
• I point out to my students the consequences of their decisions and actions	4.28 (.65)	4.43 (.59)	4.16 (.68)	6.682(1018), .000

Bold refers to the highest means and illustrates differences between Finnish and Iranian teachers.

Results

Overall, teachers in both countries rated their competence to teach purpose high (Table 2). Still, t -tests showed that Iranian teachers' ($M_{\text{Iranian}} = 4.31$; $SD = .53$) estimations were statistically significantly higher than those of Finnish teachers' ($M_{\text{Finnish}} = 4.15$; $SD = .53$) ($t(1018) = -4.859, p = .000$). Also, the means of each item were compared separately, which showed that Iranian teachers seem to concentrate more than Finnish teachers on discussion and on *reflections on purpose in life* ($t(862.513) = -11.387, p = .000$) and *teaching plans for the future* ($t(-969.718) = 9.271, p = .000$). However, Finnish teachers' evaluations showed that they *taught importance* ($t(1018) = 3.235, p = .001$) and pointed out the *consequences* of students' decisions and actions ($t(969.718) = -9.271, p = .000$) more often than Iranians.

The way in which the subject matter affected teachers' self-perception of teaching purpose was studied separately for the Iranian and Finnish cases using one-way analyses of variance. Among Iranians, there were no statistically significant differences between the teachers, as can be seen in Table 3a. In other words, all Iranian teachers evaluated their competence for teaching purpose as being high, regardless of the subject taught. In contrast, among Finnish teachers there were statistically significant relationships between the subject taught and teachers' self-perceptions in three out of four aspects of teaching purpose. First, Finnish teachers differed in their views on the *guiding purpose in life* ($F(4) = 13.01, p = .000, \eta_p^2 = .13$). Tukey's pairwise comparisons showed that teachers of religious education scored statistically significantly higher than all other teachers, including class teachers ($p = .000$; $M = 3.78, SD = .89$) and teachers of science ($p = .000$; $M = 3.38, SD = .86$), social science ($p = .014$; $M = 3.97, SD = .87$) and languages ($p = .000$; $M = 3.80, SD = .86$). Further, it should be noted that science teachers scored statistically significantly lower than class teachers ($p = .012$), social science teachers ($p = .009$) and language teachers ($p = .04$). Second, *teaching planfulness* also varied ($F(4) = 3.600, p = .007, \eta_p^2 = .04$), and Tukey's pairwise comparisons revealed that the only statistically significant difference ($p = .009$) was between teachers of religious education ($M = 4.26, SD = .50$) and science ($M = 3.75, SD = .71$). These results indicated that, in the view of Finnish teachers, science and religious education provided the most distinct perspectives for *guiding purpose in life* and *teaching planfulness*, which in turn were the aspects most strongly emphasised by the Iranian teachers. Third, Finnish teachers showed dissimilarity in *teaching consequences* ($F(4) = 8.378, p = .000, \eta_p^2 = .09$). Games-Howell pairwise comparisons revealed that class teachers who scored highest

Table 3a. Iranian class teachers' and subject teachers' views of their competence to teach purpose.

Aspects of teaching purpose	Iranian teachers' subjects	M	SD	F(4)	p	η_p^2
Guiding purpose in life	Primary school class teachers	4.42	.710	.414	.798	.004
	Science	4.43	.638			
	Social sciences	4.53	.683			
	Language	4.45	.706			
	Religion	4.41	.773			
	Total (n = 446)	4.45	.697			
Teaching power distance	Primary school class teachers	4.56	.700	1.071	.371	.010
	Science	4.45	.670			
	Social sciences	4.49	.766			
	Language	4.39	.699			
	Religion	4.36	.857			
	Total (n = 446)	4.47	.733			
Teaching importance	Primary school class teachers	4.19	.769	.027	.999	.000
	Science	4.19	.659			
	Social sciences	4.20	.753			
	Language	4.17	.714			
	Religion	4.17	.663			
	Total (n = 446)	4.19	.715			
Teaching consequences	Primary school class teachers	4.19	.726	.366	.833	.003
	Science	4.22	.626			
	Social sciences	4.12	.730			
	Language	4.14	.677			
	Religion	4.13	.684			
	Total (n = 446)	4.17	.690			

($M = 4.60$, $SD = .50$) differed statistically significantly from teachers of science ($p = .000$; $M = 4.22$, $SD = .49$), social science ($p = .010$; $M = 4.26$, $SD = .51$) and languages ($p = .009$; $M = 4.27$, $SD = .72$) in teaching consequences, but not from teachers of religious education ($p = .249$; $M = 4.39$, $SD = .55$). Fourth, as regards *teaching importance*, Finnish teachers of various subjects did not differ from one another ($F(4) = 1.598$, $p = .174$, $\eta_p^2 = .017$) (Table 3b).

Next, whether ethical sensitivity predicted teaching purpose was studied by performing linear regression analyses using the Enter method for Iranian and Finnish samples separately. As shown in Tables 4a and 4b, ethical sensitivity predicted both Iranian and Finnish teachers' competence to teach purpose: *guiding purpose in life* ($F_{\text{Iranian}}(4) = 12.183$, $p = .000$, $\Delta R^2 = .075$; $F_{\text{Finnish}}(4) = 10.041$, $p = .000$, $\Delta R^2 = .072$), *teaching planfulness* ($F_{\text{Iranian}}(4) = 11.736$, $p = .000$, $\Delta R^2 = .067$; $F_{\text{Finnish}}(4) = 11.736$, $p = .000$, $\Delta R^2 = .085$), *teaching importance* ($F_{\text{Iranian}}(4) = 7.945$, $p = .000$, $\Delta R^2 = .048$; $F_{\text{Finnish}}(4) = 10.617$, $p = .000$, $\Delta R^2 = .077$) and *teaching consequences* ($F_{\text{Iranian}}(4) = 11.602$, $p = .000$, $\Delta R^2 = .020$; $F_{\text{Finnish}}(4) = 11.602$, $p = .000$, $\Delta R^2 = .084$). However, the most influential dimensions of ethical sensitivity were CCO among the Iranians and REI among the Finns, since these dimensions predicted all four elements of purpose teaching. However, the predictive power of the regression models was modest.

Discussion

This study examined Finnish and Iranian teachers' views of their competence to teach 'purpose'. The results showed that in both countries teachers estimated their competence as high, with Iranian teachers estimating their competence higher than their Finnish colleagues. In supporting students' formation of purpose, Iranian and Finnish teachers emphasised different strategies. Iranian teachers seem to guide their students explicitly to finding purpose in life and planning their future. These aspects were emphasised regardless of the subject

Table 3b. Finnish class teachers' and subject teachers' views of their competence to teach purpose.

Aspects of teaching purpose	Finnish teachers' subjects	M	SD	F(4)	p	η_p^2
Guiding purpose in life	Primary school class teachers	3.78	.890	13.006	.000	.126
	Science	3.38	.864			
	Social sciences	3.97	.870			
	Language	3.80	.858			
	Religion	4.61	.495			
	Total (n = 366)	3.81	.900			
Teaching planfulness	Primary school class teachers	3.92	.794	3.600	.007	.038
	Science	3.75	.713			
	Social sciences	4.18	.626			
	Language	3.98	.845			
	Religion	4.26	.554			
	Total (n = 366)	3.96	.765			
Teaching importance	Primary school class teachers	4.38	.598	1.598	.174	.017
	Science	4.19	.614			
	Social sciences	4.24	.606			
	Language	4.22	.786			
	Religion	4.37	.589			
	Total (n = 366)	4.30	.640			
Teaching consequences	Primary school class teachers	4.60	.504	8.378	.000	.085
	Science	4.22	.487			
	Social sciences	4.26	.511			
	Language	4.27	.718			
	Religion	4.39	.547			
	Total (n = 366)	4.42	.571			

Table 4a. Summary of regression analysis for Iranian teachers.

Predictor	Purpose		Planfulness		Importance		Consequences	
	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β
TPO	-.041	-.036	.028	.023	-.066	-.057	-.023	-.021
CCO	.259***	.196	.256***	.184	.239***	.179	.161*	.127
REI	.089	.064	.136*	.069	.097	.069	.059	.045
ICAO	.117	.064	.052	.040	.059	.065	.039	.033
n	556	-	556	-	556	-	556	-
ΔR^2	.075	-	.067	-	.048	-	.020	-

***p = .000, *p < .05.

Table 4b. Summary of regression analysis for Finnish teachers.

Predictor	Purpose		Planfulness		Importance		Consequences	
	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β
TPO	-.112	-.060	-.076	-.048	.146*	.111	.014	.011
CCO	.123	.109	.124	.073	.099	.070	.164*	.125
REI	.338***	.207	.304***	.219	.152**	.131	.142**	.134
ICAO	.206	.110	.182*	.114	.131	.099	.163*	.133
n	464	-	464	-	464	-	464	-
ΔR^2	.072	-	.085	-	.077	-	.084	-

***p = .000, **p < .01, *p < .05.

taught. In contrast, Finnish teachers tend to concentrate on explaining the importance of the tasks and on the consequences of students' actions, a result that is in line with the Finnish students' perceptions (Bundick and Tirri 2014). However, according to Finnish teachers, religious education seemed to provide a subject in which teachers can guide students to consider explicitly their purpose in life and plans for the future (Niemi 1987; Ubani 2013). Thus,

the results indicate that straightforward discussions of purpose in life seem to be associated with religions and worldviews, which is natural, considering the existential nature of the purpose concept (Damon, Menon, and Bronk 2003; Frankl 1988). In Finland, this means that religion education classes offer crucially important spaces for reflections on purpose (Ubani 2013). The results also seemed to point to the fact that Finnish teacher education programmes, even multicultural ones, ignore the responsibility of addressing and educating teachers to recognise and discuss religions and worldviews (Riitaoja and Dervin 2014; Riitaoja, Poulter, and Kuusisto 2010), whereas in Iran, religion is integrated into all instruction, regardless of the subject or educational level (Hedayati et al. 2016). This might explain why competence for teaching purpose was evaluated as equally high among all Iranian teachers. However, in Iran the question remains of whether the school system provides support for the development of purpose in youth who represent ideological or religious minorities, given that teachers are required to educate students based on Islamic beliefs (Hedayati et al. 2016). For example, one of the main textbooks integrated into the Iranian curriculum has been 'religion and life', which tries to send the following message to all students, namely that the main route to finding a good life is embedded in Islamic values (e.g. Etesami 2015; TFFTES 2012, part 5 Curriculum). This hegemonic trend in the national curriculum also presents a challenge to academic freedom, as this kind of 'religious and cultural reproduction' hinders teachers and students from introducing different discourses into the classroom. Thus, teacher education programmes in both Iran and Finland are challenged to support recognition of religions and worldviews of the majorities as well as the minorities in order to support each student's holistic growth in an ethically sustainable manner.

The present study also showed that both Iranian and Finnish teachers' ethical sensitivities were associated with their competence for teaching purpose; all four elements of purpose teaching were predicted by *caring about others* in Iran and by REI in Finland. Thus, improving teachers' ethical sensitivity skills in teacher education programmes could provide a significant path for supporting teachers' competence in teaching purpose. Furthermore, regardless of different contextual insights in both Iran and Finland, one of the main applications of the present study is to integrate teaching purpose into teacher education programmes as well as into teacher professional development. Today, students and teachers are dealing with new information, knowledge, philosophies and social and cultural values with the help of information and communication technology. Teachers and students are engaged in a kind of 'selection crisis', meaning they must determine the kinds of values, knowledge and philosophy to consider in order to find their paths in their academic and personal lives. Thus, one of the main ethical and professional responsibilities of teachers and teacher educators is to help students and young people navigate and find their purpose in school communities and in society (Damon 2008). However, according to Finnish teachers, science and mathematics especially seemed to offer the most challenging contexts for teaching purpose; the teachers of these subjects felt the least competent to address purpose-related issues in their classes. Similar trends regarding maths and science teachers have been found among Finnish student teachers (Tirri and Kuusisto *Forthcoming*) as well as in a study on Finnish teachers' ethical sensitivity (Kuusisto, Tirri, and Rissanen 2012). The results could reflect a Western pedagogical culture in which maths and science teachers concentrate on teaching the 'pure' content of their subjects, while the integration of the subject into a moral and holistic education is seen as problematic (Grossman and Stodolsky 1995; van Veen et al. 2001). Hence, the results challenge Finnish in-service and pre-service teacher education programmes to

create new approaches and new cultures for mathematics and science education, which intentionally take into account the moral aspects of teaching.

To conclude, the results give an overview of the perceptions of teachers in two countries, Finland and Iran, of their competence to teach purpose. Teachers in both countries evaluated their skills as being high, but more detailed analysis showed that in Iran, teachers give instruction in purpose more directly than their colleagues in Finland, approaches that in turn reflect educational and cultural values in the respective countries. This study had a quantitative approach to teachers' self-evaluations and thus does not reveal how teachers actually teach purpose in classroom interaction nor can it explain teachers' pedagogical thinking regarding values and educational aims. More studies with observational and interview data are needed to build pedagogies and instructional approaches to teaching purpose in Finland, Iran and other countries.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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