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What do teachers think about youth purpose?

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ABSTRACT

Life purpose combines personal meaning, future intention, active engagement and expected beyond-the-self impact into a self-regulating beacon for decisions and actions. Interest has grown in how teachers could foster youth purpose. Although studies show relationships between pedagogy and purpose, how teachers themselves understand the concept and view their role in its development need more research. This descriptive, qualitative, secondary analysis of observations and comments of teachers in the United States of America during their normal school days can help teacher educators to instil a purpose orientation in pedagogical training. Teachers are interested in purpose for pupils and for themselves. But they are ambivalent about their efficacy to support purpose development. Currently, purpose is often equated with career rather than with a broader life aim. Personal meaning and engagement are easier purpose dimensions for teachers to design activities for pupils to practice, whereas intention and beyond-the-self impact are less often taught or only addressed abstractly. Specific purpose-related activities are shared to provide ideas for other teachers' own purpose pedagogies.

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Introduction

Schools worldwide increasingly are being asked to educate for life success and prosocial engagement (Tirri 2012). Pupils are expected not only to learn *that* something is important, but also to learn *why*, including why they as individuals are important to society (Damon 2009). One approach calls for schools to foster the development of life purpose, a stable, long-term aim with four integrated dimensions: personal meaning or emotional significance, intention toward future behaviour, engagement or current actions toward the aim and recognition of the beyond-the-self impact of one's actions and plans (Damon, Menon, and Cotton Bronk 2003). Purpose is a form of self-regulation, which not only can improve individuals' academic achievement (Yeager and Bundick 2009) but also create a future-oriented life pathway for themselves (Nurmi 1991) towards positive well-being (Burrow and Hill 2011).

Since life purpose is an internalised beacon that helps individuals steer their own futures (Moran 2009), the person's subjective framing of their purpose is important (Moran 2014b) and can motivate further learning (Yeager and Walton 2011). A few qualitative studies show

how *youth* think about life purpose (Bronk 2012; Moran 2014b). Less research has addressed *teachers'* subjective understandings of life purpose, although a few studies have used more objective approaches (Bundick and Tirri 2014). Better understanding how teachers view new educational initiatives can have a big impact on those initiatives' success (De Vries and Beijaard 1999; Van den Berg 2002).

This paper describes a secondary analysis of exploratory data collected during observational visits in a small sample of public schools in the United States. The experiences, lessons and activities that teachers considered important for developing youth purpose were coded in relation to Damon's (2008) dimensions of purpose for insights on how teacher educators might make pedagogies for purpose development more central in youth education.

The importance of purpose development to educational effectiveness

Although educating pupils for purpose tends to be viewed as supplementary to academic achievement, it may be the case that purpose development is fundamental for educational effectiveness over the long term. A reciprocal, dynamic relationship between purpose and learning suggests a possible model of educating *for* purpose: schools support pupils to find an individual life purpose, which becomes a mechanism of self-regulation (Moran 2014a). Recent meta-analyses covering two decades of educational effectiveness studies emphasise how important self-regulation is to positive pupil outcomes (Seidel and Shavelson 2007).

Supporting the development of a pupil to self-regulate is not the same as supporting the pupil (Moran et al. 2012). Indeed, these two kinds of support may be antagonistic if supporting the person means making a task easier rather than encouraging mastery (Thoonen et al. 2011). Larson (2006) uses the term 'intentionality paradox' to refer to the challenge for teachers to scaffold pupils' own psychological control rather than to control pupils' behaviour directly. If done skilfully, purpose development transforms pupils from learning consumers into autonomous learning partners (Thoonen et al. 2011). Pupils focus on their purpose to keep themselves on track because they have a vested personal interest in the schoolwork, even if the immediate educational task is not intrinsically interesting to them (Yeager et al. 2014). If teachers can help pupils create a purpose as an internal beacon to give themselves momentum, then the developmental trajectory of a pupil's purpose may serve as an indicator of whether pupils are on the right path.

The importance of education in the development of purpose

Most youths' purposes are normative (Moran 2010), and school is a key institution for promoting normative goals and behaviours (Flum and Kaplan 2006). Schools help pupils explore various pathways to realise valued purposes (Malin et al. 2013), and schools provide mentors, models and opportunities to step onto a particular pathway (Moran et al. 2012).

But the relationship between today's schooling practices and purpose development remains unclear. On one hand, most youth currently do not see a connection between their schooling and their long-term aims (Kiang 2011; Moran et al. 2012). On the other hand, several school-based programmes show life purpose *can* be addressed, e.g. through character education, civic engagement and 'whole child' curricula (Tirri and Ubani 2013).

A key disjunction between educational practices and purpose development is that schools tend not to recognise that purpose has content, *what* the particular person aims to become

(Damon 2008). The content may be: become an astronaut, overcome racism, raise conscientious children and so forth. This content guides the youth's behaviour and maintains momentum despite setbacks (Moran 2014a). The specificity of the purpose can link classroom activities to vested interests in their own futures (Damon 2008).

Yet, schooling in many countries primarily focuses on academics based on *objective* standards and testing that take little heed of pupils' individualised life aims (e.g. Dar 2015; Thoonen et al. 2011). A 'one size fits all' curriculum may not align with the particular purpose contents of pupils (Malin et al. 2013; Moran et al. 2012), which can contribute to pupils discounting the value of lessons to their futures, resulting in missed learning opportunities. Even much of the research on youth purpose uses decontextualised measures that do not consider purpose content (e.g. Steger et al. 2006). If purpose content is recognised, in many countries, that content focuses on career, which limits purpose's relevance to what a young person will do for a living, not who the young person aims to become and why (e.g. Rathman 2005; Schoon 2001; Shin et al. 2014).

Thus, it is not surprising that a few studies suggest that teachers are better at helping youth *without* a purpose to find an interest that might develop into a meaningful intention than at helping youth *with* purpose gather momentum (Bundick 2011). Other studies suggest that some educational practices may help youth with *nascent* purposes find opportunities to engage their aims (Malin et al. 2013; Moran et al. 2012) by seeing the influence of their actions on others (Moran 2010), or deepening their commitment to and integration of the purpose into their various life roles (Bronk 2012). Qualitative analyses and case studies show that the most strongly purposeful youth who do mention schooling as an influence often reflect on how a *teacher*, in particular, was fundamental to the development of their purpose (Bronk 2012; Moran et al. 2012).

The central role of teachers

Researchers argue that teachers *should* take a leadership role in purpose development (Dik et al. 2011; Schachter and Rich 2011). Research on teachers' roles in pupils' self-directedness, autonomy and purposefulness has grown in recent years (Bundick and Tirri 2014; Flores and Niklasson 2014; Reinders and Balcikanli 2011; Schachter and Rich 2011). Overall, the few studies relating pedagogy and teacher characteristics with youth purpose find positive correlations (Mariano 2011).

Teachers provide an interpersonal, emotional dimension to learning (Lam et al. 2014) that can stimulate both personal meaning and beyond-the-self orientation in pupils. Teachers facilitate pupil internal control and self-regulation (Thoonen et al. 2011). Teacher competence for future planning, goal setting, consideration of consequences and emphasis on the importance of schooling can affect how much pupils believe they have a life purpose (Bundick and Tirri 2014).

Furthermore, teachers themselves tend to be purposeful. Statistical studies suggest that people with purposeful motivations are drawn to teaching (Flores and Niklasson 2014). The long-term perspective associated with purpose seems to influence teachers' resilience and motivation to pursue lifelong self-development (Tirri and Ubani 2013). Teachers can serve as role models to inspire pupils and to demonstrate desired behaviour (Dar 2015; Morgenroth, Ryan, and Peters 2015).

Overview of studies

This research is based on data collected as part of a grant-funded, nationwide, four-year study to examine the prevalence, correlates, supports and development of life purpose in young people age 12–22 in the United States of America. The two exploratory, secondary analyses described below convey teachers' pedagogical considerations in relation to the four dimensions of youth purpose (Damon 2008). Study 1 categorises researchers' observations of how teachers perceive opportunities and design practices to address purpose during the school day. Study 2 categorises teachers' responses to explicit questions about teaching for purpose development collected during a special in-service training day.

This study is exempt from human subjects research review and consent forms in the United States because it is a secondary analysis on data collected in established educational settings involving normal educational practices, and because information from artefacts on display, conversations and observation of public behaviour did not include personally identifying information. The umbrella study was under a human subjects protocol of the university where the observers were employed.

Study 1: teacher practices: research questions

- (1) How do teachers understand the dimensions of purpose?
- (2) In what ways and contexts do teachers address purpose dimensions in their lessons or interactions with pupils?

Method

Sample and data collection

This secondary analysis aims to catalogue teachers' ideas and actions according to Damon's (2008) four dimensions of purpose and to look for patterns in teachers' perspectives and practices to develop youth purpose in schools. Source documents (Andrews, Rathman, and Moran 2008; Rathman 2008) described observations of teacher actions and comments collected by three observers: a male in his 20s, a female in her 30s and a female in her 50s. Collection occurred during visits over two years to a public K-12 rural school in the Rocky Mountains and several New England public schools: one urban and three suburban middle schools, and one suburban and one urban high school.

The original purpose of the visits was to record where, when and how potentially purpose-related ideas or activities were occurring in schools in any grade level or subject matter. School access and participation were coordinated through a non-profit organisation that was working with these schools to enhance 'student aspirations'. School administrators volunteered to have observers sit in on lessons, assemblies, faculty meetings, in-service training, parent-teacher association meetings and special events. Teachers volunteered to host observers in classrooms or activities and to have conversations about their teaching practices and opportunities. Approximately 85 teachers directly interacted with observers over all visits, but more teachers were observed indirectly in large-group events. Teacher comments were not recorded verbatim, and comments were not linked to teacher identities.

Observers did not have a pre-set interview guide. They were trained to be perceptive, casual and conversational. During classes, they focused on pupil engagement levels and topics of discussions. After classes, observers asked teachers to see lesson plans and pupil work, reflect on pupil responses or projects and share what the teacher considered most important about what happened in the classroom. When observing teacher trainings and meetings, observers noted when and how teachers addressed pupil meaning-making, future prospects, community participation and self-directedness.

Qualitative data analyses

Based on prior work that associates purposefulness with agency (e.g. Bandura et al. 2001; Damon 2008), observations were categorised according to who held the majority of agency in the activity or event:

- decision-makers outside the school, such as policy-makers or district leaders (such as with standardised tests or other externally imposed requirements);
- the school community as a whole (such as with rallies, assemblies or school-community partnerships);
- teachers (such as with lectures and activities for which the teacher makes decisions); and
- pupils (such as individual projects, extracurricular leadership roles and assignments for which pupils can choose the topic).

Because this paper's research questions focus on teachers' roles in purpose development and because youth purpose theory emphasises youths' internal beacons (Damon 2008), only observations of situations in which teacher or pupil was the primary agent were analysed further.

These remaining teacher-agentive or pupil-agentive observations were categorised based on which of the four dimensions of Damon's (2008) purpose definition the observed event aimed to affect. The first 20% of the remaining observations in the collated document were content analysed (Boyatzis 1998; Miles and Huberman 1994) by two coders, achieving 82% reliability. Thereafter, the other 80% of observations were coded by one coder. An observation could be coded as present for none, any or all of the dimensions:

- *Personal meaning* was coded when the observation emphasised pupils' idiosyncratic understandings, values, emotional significance or what pupils' care about. For example, activities in which pupils shared their own perspectives on course content or considered the implications of the material in their own lives were coded as personal meaning. Activities calling for recitation of objective facts, reproducing denotative meanings of words or demonstrating understanding of a pre-defined 'correct' answer were not coded as personal meaning.
- *Intention* was coded when the observation showed pupils focused on their own futures. Activities that involved pupils contemplating 'what could be' scenarios, planning their own work, stating and pursuing goals, articulating why they were pursuing a particular end and connecting current behaviours to later opportunities were coded as intention. Following directions, accidental or random responses, memorisation of facts or activities that lacked anticipation were not coded as intention.

- *Engagement* was coded when the observation involved pupils acting interested or curious, making choices or judgements or taking responsibility. Activities that had a 'gap' requiring pupils to make decisions, solve problems, strategise, transform materials, generate new ideas or otherwise have something at stake in the outcome were coded as engagement. Listening to information, rote activities or lesson formats that gave no opportunity for pupils to act or speak were not coded as engagement.
- *Beyond-the-self impact* was coded when the observation included mechanisms through which pupils' actions were experienced by others, impacted others or required a response from others, ideally in a way that pupils could gather feedback on those impacts. Activities that involved collaboration, presentation of ideas to people other than the teacher, cooperation with people outside the classroom and interaction with community members were coded as beyond-the-self impact. Handing in assignments only to the teacher, activities focused on benefits only to the pupil (e.g. grade or award) or activities where other individuals relevant to the topic or situation are not made salient to the pupil (e.g. raising money for an unknown entity) were not coded as beyond-the-self impact.

Results

Four patterns emerged regarding pedagogical tools teachers considered as helping pupils develop life purpose: 'Purpose is what I already do'; 'I role model purposefulness'; 'I scout real-world opportunities'; and 'I coach pupils to step up'. In the first two patterns, the agency stays clearly with the teachers, but in the second two patterns, the agency segues to the pupils.

Teacher as unchanging: 'purpose is what I already do, but by a different name'

Several teachers thought fostering purpose was a new name for tried-and-true educational strategies. This approach supported thinking *about* purpose. The most common observation was direct instruction of purpose, usually in terms of career guidance. Purpose as its own subject matter in a self-contained unit helped pupils understand the *concept* of purpose, including sub-concepts like goal-setting, planning, values and reasoning. These concepts linked to the intention and meaning dimensions of purpose abstractly, but the dimensions of engagement and effects on others were generally ignored.

Teachers taught pupils to diagram events or consequences that made intellectual connections between present and future or between interests and opportunities. They created bulletin boards or ceremonies that represented pupil intellectual accomplishments. But there was no impetus or venue for pupils to put themselves, as idiosyncratic individuals, into the class content, such as linking academic learning to their lives outside school or to their specific future aims. There were no opportunities for pupils to try real or simulated activities through which they might 'get a feel for' a specific purpose.

Purpose as career guidance involved pupils taking vocational interest or aptitude tests, attending career fairs or shadowing a professional for a day to learn about possible work roles. This approach emphasised intention: what do pupils want to be, or what should they be, when they join the workforce? Teachers helped pupils narrow their interests, tie their

interests to work fields and reinforced how particular academic skills like math or writing are needed for most jobs. Several teachers noted they felt increased pressure to link class work to careers.

Teacher as role model: ‘purpose is a “trickle down” process’

Although a few teachers said they had not found their own life purpose yet, several teachers suggested their role was to be exemplars of purpose. This role modelling incorporated personal meaning and intention, but it focused on the *teacher’s* meaning and intentions. For example, some teachers showcased their own specific life purposes by telling stories or leading field trips to influential locations to portray the path they took in life. Other teachers infused their life purpose into units or afterschool clubs, such as jewellery-making or computer gaming.

A few teachers designed activities that allowed pupils to engage with the teacher’s life purpose. Sometimes, these activities also made pupils aware of the purpose’s beyond-the-self impact. The clearest example was when teachers involved pupils in service projects. One health teacher’s unit on infection prevention included pupils helping a charity provide nets to protect children in Africa from malaria infection. A science teacher’s unit demonstrated how pupils’ actions contributed to nested ecological systems. An art department partnered with a community arts organisation so pupils could contribute to public arts projects.

The role model approach allowed pupils to see teachers as multidimensional adults with lives beyond the teacher role. These teachers provided examples of purposeful behaviour for pupils to emulate. A few teachers invited guest speakers, assigned biographical or autobiographical readings or shared newspaper articles on purposeful people in the community who were relevant to their subject matter so pupils were exposed to a wider variety of purpose exemplars. These other exemplars made salient the beyond-the-self impact dimension of purpose because the talks, books or articles showed how their life aims made a difference to others.

Although a role-modelling approach to purpose development is promising, clarification on how teachers’ purposes ‘trickle down’ to become pupil purposes was lacking. For example, some of the lessons were unclear about the specific objective of the role modelling: were teachers modelling possible purpose contents, or behaviours for finding purpose, or strategies to integrate purpose dimensions or general inspiration for being a ‘good person’? Furthermore, the role modelling rarely allowed pupils to explore *their own* meanings, intentions or possible beyond-the-self impacts. Thus, in regards to the *pupils’* purpose development, these activities remained passive.

Teacher as architect of opportunities: ‘purpose is finding a place in the world’

High school teachers were more likely than middle school teachers to think purpose involved finding a place to contribute to real-world institutions and communities. Teachers found or designed opportunities for pupils to practice contributing. Thus, this pattern of pedagogy focused clearly on the engagement and beyond-the-self impact dimensions of purpose. The clearest manifestation of this teaching pattern was through internships and service-learning.

One high school’s vocational-technical faculty set up actual businesses that employed pupils. A day-care employed pupils to take care of faculty members’ children during the

work day. A pupil-run café served lunches to faculty and the public. Pupil mechanics fixed faculty members' cars. The wood shop built backyard storage sheds for community residents. Computer repair pupils ran a school-wide help desk. Graphic design pupils created letterhead, business cards and posters for school clubs and community clients. Drafting pupils drew plans that electrician pupils used to install electronics in school rooms built by carpentry pupils and decorated by interior design pupils.

Several schools, including middle schools, promoted community service or rallied behind social causes. The whole school community collected winter coats for needy children, or supported a charity that helps children who had lost their hands or joined an anti-bullying campaign. Teachers recognised how such projects not only developed skills but also helped develop personal meaning (How do my actions affect who I am?) and beyond-the-self impact (How do my actions affect others' well-being?).

However, teachers still stayed in control of the activity design and usually did not tailor experiences or tasks to pupils' budding individual life purposes. Teachers' descriptions of the businesses or community service projects used words like 'pupils can *find* their purposes' rather than tailoring opportunities to pupils who already had an idea of their paths forward. These opportunities were aimed to help purpose *searchers* but not as much to help youth already purposeful. The implicit assumption was that school might help launch a purpose, but it is less facile at supporting an existing purpose.

These real-world opportunities had the potential to address all four dimensions of purpose. However, not all did. For example, fundraising-only projects did not allow pupils to meet the people that benefited from their efforts, thus thwarting the important feedback loop of *experiencing* one's own beyond-the-self impact. The most talked-about projects included this feedback mechanism, such as when pupils received thank you notes from some children who got coats. Furthermore, service projects were more often found in non-academic subject areas, like health class or an advisory period. The impact of, for example, math and language on the service's outcome was less apparent. Finally, these projects tended to be of limited duration rather than continuing, so pupils did not have the opportunity to see growing impact over time. Often due to time constraints, pupils were rarely given time to reflect on these opportunities in relation to their own purposes. So it is unclear whether these experiences clarified into personal meaning or a specific intention to drive further behaviour.

There were not many pedagogical tools at this large scale. Despite the potential of these entrepreneurial or community service opportunities, they involved considerable planning and coordination among several teachers or community members. Most teachers tended to share smaller activities that usually highlighted only one purpose dimension and that could be implemented within a classroom with limited resources. Even at smaller scales, a few teachers were quite clever and creative in their approaches. Below are brief activity prompts for pupils that teachers shared, categorised by purpose dimension (because all of the activities involve pupil action, engagement is not included as a separate category):

- (1) To convey pupils' personal meaning with clarity and succinctness:
 - Create statements of values and purpose that could be read aloud to the class or recorded and shared more widely.
 - Write poems that express or exemplify your purpose in life in different scenarios.

- Build a character and write a purposeful story for the character, then compare your story with other pupils' stories regarding the effect of the purposes on the story plots.
- (2) To extend pupils' intentions further into the future:
- Create a map of life events in your past and how they linked together to show how you became who you are today. Then imagine future events 5, 10, 20, 40 years from now that could reasonably result from these past events: What could happen in your future?
 - Design a collage or poster of your past, present and future and how these time periods connect with each other.
 - Write a letter of intent for the 'job of life' that explains why you are suited for the job.
 - Picture an ideal future for yourself, then plan *backwards* how that ideal future connects to now.
 - Set a goal for this week. Keep detailed time sheets of how you use time. At the end of the week, review your time sheets and answer these questions: How effectively did you use your time to achieve the goal? If you relived this past week again, what would you do differently? What did you learn from this exercise about connecting current actions to future opportunities?
- (3) To focus pupils on how they influence lives beyond their own:
- Find an elderly person, working professional or other inspirational person and correspond with them about their purpose and how it contributes to others' well-being.
 - Research charities or social causes, then select one you consider personally important and write about how and why you could contribute to it.

This list shows that teachers are thinking innovatively about how to infuse the dimensions of purpose into activities that engage pupils. No teacher conveyed a multidimensional portrayal of purpose akin to Damon's (2008) four-dimensional definition. But many teachers conveyed ideas related to at least one of Damon's dimensions.

Teacher as coach: 'purpose is reaching, stretching'

The final pattern is the only one in which the pupils are the most agentic in the activity. They clearly are the 'prime movers' in the situation. Three pedagogical tools were most often mentioned in this pattern: individualised learning programmes in which the pupil was both teacher and learner of a unit not offered within the school's current curriculum; pupil-led events like entrepreneurial career fairs; and peer mentoring in which pupils coached other pupils on solving general life problems.

These teachers understood a need to shift from instructing pupils directly towards coaching pupils so that pupils themselves structure their own pathways. Teachers were still needed to help pupils stay on track and within legal and safety requirements, but they used words like 'support' rather than 'instruct' or 'teach'. Responsibility for these activities lay with *pupils* to cause an effect on themselves or others. Rather than working from an a priori rubric to *evaluate* pupil performance, teachers stayed perceptive to pupils' progress so they could adjust plans, actions or feedback to make the experience *valuable* to the pupil.

The path of each pupil-designed activity differed in regards to which dimension of purpose might come to the fore: some pupils started by developing personal meaning and intention, but had trouble finding ways to engage. Others engaged and found paths to

continue in the future, but forgot how they were affecting others. Still others focused on the impact they could have on others without reflecting on what the experience meant to their own development. Most of the teachers using these pedagogical tools admitted that they tended to focus on only one of the purpose dimensions: service-learning teachers on engagement, arts teachers on personal meaning, entrepreneurship/business teachers on intention and planning and vocational-technical teachers on beyond-the-self impact.

Interestingly, the teachers who shared these pupil-agentic projects, which theoretically are most likely to stimulate purpose, also expressed a desire for more training in how to teach for youth purposefulness. Teachers expressed enjoyment of witnessing pupils grow in their agency, intentionality, meaningfulness and contributory potential. But they also shared the anxiety they felt to make sure that 'things worked out ok' when they were not as in control of the outcomes as they would be with more traditional pedagogical methods. One teacher wondered how to overcome the urge to 'step in' with answers or 'smooth over the bumps' when such steps may interfere with pupil agency and purpose development. A final thought that one teacher expressed was: 'I feel like I need to completely retrain myself and my pupils to focus on moving forward toward a goal, not on reaching the goal'. This coaching pattern, in particular, suggests that perhaps educating for purpose is to instil in pupils the momentum to reach continually toward something worthy.

Study 2: teacher responses: research questions

- (1) How do teachers view their own life purpose and the supports they received to develop it?
- (2) What actions do teachers currently take that they believe foster purpose in pupils?
- (3) What else do teachers think they could do to help pupils develop life purpose?

Method

Sample and measure

Near the end of the second year of school visits in New England, approximately 200 teachers and administrators attended a district-wide, in-service training session focused on a whole-child approach to education. Observers directly introduced to teachers the concept of life purpose, its four dimensions and recent research findings about it. The observers asked teachers to complete a short worksheet. Anonymously, 131 participants (66%) submitted responses to three prompts:

- (1) How did you discover your own purpose in life? Who supported you? What role did school play?
- (2) How do you develop/nurture/support purpose in the pupils with whom you work? List at least three concrete ways that educators can help pupils find and pursue their purpose in life.
- (3) Given our conversation today, what might you do differently, more deeply or in addition to what you currently do in order to help your pupils discover their purpose?

Qualitative data analyses

Responses to the first question were binary coded by the author (1 if mentioned, 0 if not) for (a) whether school was mentioned as supportive or adverse to their purpose development; (b) whether school played a major or minor role in their own purpose development; (c) whether their own teachers served as a positive or negative influence; (d) whether purpose was discovered while in school or later as an adult; and (e) whether they were still searching for a life purpose.

Responses to the second question were binary coded for particular tactics: (a) caring for the pupil as an individual; (b) encouraging pupils to pursue their ambitions; (c) providing career guidance; (d) providing opportunities for pupils to engage their purposes; (e) tying pupil interests to the 'real world'; (f) providing tools or activities for pupils' independent self-exploration; (g) engaging in conversations directly addressing purpose or the future; (h) helping others; (i) providing ways for pupils to interact with and support each other; (j) role modelling purposefulness; (k) providing activities for pupils to reflect on their actions and plans.

Responses to the third question were binary coded using the same categories as the second question, plus on additional tactic that emerged: (l) focusing on behaviours that do not directly address or involve pupils, such as policy, initiatives, school structure, staff development, advisory programmes or parental involvement.

The coded responses for questions 2 and 3 were further categorised according to the four dimensions of purpose:

- *Personal meaning*: caring for pupils; supporting pupils' self-exploration to understand themselves better.
- *Intention*: encouraging pupils to pursue ambitions; providing career guidance; directly addressing purpose or the future; pupils' reflecting on their actions and plans.
- *Engagement*: providing opportunities to engage purposes; tying pupil interests to the 'real world'.
- *Beyond-the-self impact*: helping others; providing pupil interactions and peer support.

Role modelling purposefulness and focusing on initiatives not directly tied to pupils were not linked to the four dimensions of purpose because they do not focus on pupils.

Results

Teachers' own purpose development

See Table 1. Teachers tended to consider their purpose development as a process of 'experimentation' or 'discovery' or 'trial and error' that involved 'ongoing evolution' through several life experiences 'until I found my niche' or realised 'where I belong'. A little 'guidance' or 'acknowledgement of what I was doing' plus 'luck' that 'opportunities presented themselves' led to a 'realisation'. For a few teachers, there was an early anchor: 'I always loved school'; or 'I have always worked with children'; or 'when K was born and H had issues, it was all about helping children change their lives for the better'; or 'by having a younger brother with speech and language difficulties'. For a few teachers (7%), the search for a purpose still continued: 'Funny question because it assumes I have an answer'. One teacher suggested there was unlikely to be an end: 'The more I see of the world the less I'm all about the answer'.

Table 1. Influences on teachers' purpose development.

Teachers' purpose development	Respondents who mentioned (%)
School was major positive influence on teacher's purpose	27%
School was minor positive influence	8%
School was not an influence	5%
School was a negative 'anti' influence	2%
Former teacher was positive influence	21%
Former teacher was negative influence	3%
Teacher found purpose as youth (while still in school)	45%
Teacher found purpose as adult (after school)	32%
Teacher is uncertain or searching for purpose	7%

Note: $N = 131$. Question presented to teachers during a districtwide in-service training session. Responses do not add to 100% because some teachers mentioned non-school supports or had missing or unintelligible responses.

Most teachers considered their teaching job as their purpose. This result is expected, given the general correspondence between purpose and career in most teachers' thinking. However, two other purpose contents were mentioned that made teaching instrumental to a larger purpose. First was having children of one's own, which sometimes was a catalyst for becoming a teacher or made teaching an extension of supporting their families: 'by watching my children as babies'; 'my child being born and the prospect of that future was huge'; 'supporting my family's aspirations'. Second was having a more abstract purpose that gave a 'why' for the act of teaching, such as to impact lives positively, support human rights, or improve children's chances, whereby teaching became the vehicle to achieve the larger purpose: 'support kids to make them feel their voice is important'; 'help others work through issues that are preventing them from realising their full potential'; 'laughter, peace and politics'.

Teaching was most often pursued because the teachers loved children, or enjoyed early opportunities to work with children as babysitters or camp counsellors or tutors, or they were good at school. In other words, engagement drove intention: teachers tried an activity, which they enjoyed or excelled in, and then they created an intention to continue or expand that activity into a career.

One in 10 teachers mentioned how their own children stimulated pursuit of teaching. A few mentioned that they entered teaching after they left another field, which suggests a shift in purpose, such as being 'laid off my blue collar job and had nowhere to go', or finding a new context to enact a more general purpose, such as 'after working in business for a number of years I came to the realisation that education would make a longer lasting positive impact on society'.

As might be expected, almost half (42%) of teachers mentioned school as playing a role in their own life purpose development. College and high school memories were recalled more often as examples. But a few teachers mentioned events in elementary school that were pivotal, such as 'in first grade I retaught the lessons to students who did not understand and have been teaching ever since'. Only 2% named school as a negative influence, noting they became teachers to rectify or counteract adversity they suffered as pupils: 'I hated school, I knew that I could make it more fun'; 'Mrs. B was rude to me in 8th grade'. Some were ambivalent: 'school provided opportunities, opened doors, but has also limited me by keeping things "uniform"'.

About one-third considered school a positive influence, by developing skills, allowing reflection, validating identity and sometimes providing a safe haven. About a quarter (27%)

Table 2. What teachers said they currently or would consider doing to develop youth purpose.

Teachers' purpose-related practices	Current (%)	Consider (%)
Care about pupil (personal meaning)	65	34
Provide opportunities (engagement)	32	15
Encourage pupil ambitions (intention)	29	7
Promote pupil self-exploration (personal meaning)	21	2
Directly talk about purpose/future (intention)	21	19
Help others (beyond-the-self)	15	3
Role-model purposefulness (n/a)	11	7
Give career guidance (intention)	5	3
Give reality check (engagement)	4	0
Design pupil–pupil interaction (beyond-the-self)	4	2
Promote reflection/why perspective (intention)	4	2
Non-pupil focus, e.g. committees, policy (n/a)		26

Note: $N = 131$. Questions presented to teachers during a districtwide in-service training session. Responses do not add to 100% because, although the question asked for three specific practices, teachers varied in both the quantity and focus of practices. Synonymous practices were counted only once (e.g. 'show I care' and 'build personal relationship' were both categorised as 'care').

thought school was a major influence: 'literature and reading was a raft I clung to in difficult times', or 'people were there who believed in me' or 'making it cool for a girl to be smart and encouraging my ambitions'. Another 8% thought school was a minor influence: 'school gave me the tools ... but not in discovering my purpose' or 'only in observation of teachers working with me'. One in five respondents said their own teachers helped them choose the teaching profession, often because their former teachers were models to emulate or explicitly encouraged them. Only 3% mentioned that a former teacher modelled what they wanted *not* to become. Although almost half of respondents realised they wanted to be in education while pupils, another third did not focus on teaching until adulthood.

In summary, many but not all of these teachers saw their profession as a 'calling' and pursued it to help young people, most often by following the teaching patterns they observed and liked when they were pupils. Teaching was a way for them to 'pay forward' their own good experiences in school to the next generation.

Teachers' current and imagined future efforts

See Table 2. Teachers' self-reported current efforts to foster youth purpose clustered into three patterns that emphasised *how* the teacher was interacting with pupils. The strongest pattern was *relational*, which included caring, encouragement, connecting to pupils through role modelling, exemplifying purposefulness and forging positive pupil-to-pupil relations. By far, the top effort (65%) was caring for the pupil as a person. This pattern focuses primarily on *teacher-as-agent*: teachers bestowed something valuable on the pupils, such as to offer an open ear for listening, to 'encourage their talents and dreams', to 'believe in them even when they don't' or to 'have lunch with kids'. The most repeated word in responses was 'listen'.

The second pattern was *behavioural*, which focuses on *pupils-as-agents*, such as by demonstrating specific hands-on opportunities, prosocial acts and self-exploration. Teachers played a supporting role, such as finding opportunities (32%) and encouraging pupil actions (29%). They guided, coached or set up pupils actions: 'finding resources' or seeking chances for pupils to 'practice their interests'. Similar comments included: 'I give the kids in my class

Table 3. Relational, behavioural and informational patterns for addressing purpose's dimensions.

Purpose dimension	Pattern		
	Relational	Behavioural	Informational
Personal meaning Intention	Care for pupil Encourage ambition	Self-explore	Talk about future Career guidance Reflect/why Reality check
Engagement Beyond-the-self impact	Pupil interactions	Opportunities Help others	

choice; 'placing pupils in a variety of roles', 'exposure' to contexts, 'allow pupils to mentor younger pupils' or 'everyone has something to offer ... find some form of success'.

The least mentioned pattern was *informational*, focusing on traditional teacher tasks: directly teaching or talking about purpose, providing reflection exercises, giving career guidance and serving as a 'reality check' on pupils' aims. These comments were often in shorthand with little elaboration: 'provide information', 'obtain books on certain subjects' or 'define purpose overtly'.

When considering future tactics they might try, many teachers emphasised doing more of what they already do. One in three teachers considered caring more about pupils: 'be more visible' or 'talking about what they enjoy'. Teaching purpose through formal lessons was mentioned by one in five: 'asking the question "what do you want to do when you grow up?"' or 'bulletin boards to initiate discussion about their purpose in life' or 'future planning with pupils'. The only other consideration mentioned by more than 10% was to provide hands-on opportunities (experiential learning): 'give more opportunities for pupils to relate learning to their lives', 'give pupils jobs', 'expand afterschool activities', 'student council, student store., etc., examples of ways to further involve kids to the school' or 'do more community service with kids'. One in four focused future possible actions on what *others* could do, such as task forces, policy-makers or other staff.

As with study 1, teacher efforts also were categorised 'top down' in relation to Damon's (2008) four dimensions of purpose. In current practices, personal meaning was most often supported: teachers caring about pupils as individuals (65%) and promoting pupil self-exploration (21%). Intention also was well supported: teachers encouraging pupils to pursue ambitions (29%) or directly talking about purpose and the future (21%). Engagement was moderately supported: teachers providing opportunities (32%). Beyond-the-self impact was least supported: helping others (15%).

See Table 3. Looking at 'teacher view' and 'researcher view' categorisations simultaneously in a cross-table, it becomes more obvious the difficulty of overcoming traditional educational formats. The only cell with more than one practice is an informational focus on intention by providing a few ways to talk about the future. Yet, the table also shows promise for how teachers are already enacting ways to address the four dimensions of purpose, even if they do not yet use the researchers' specific language about the dimensions.

Discussion

This paper's contributions focus on: (a) teachers' concrete pedagogical examples of purpose-related activities; (b) the categorisation and analysis of teacher experiences and

suggestions along the four dimensions of youth purpose; and (c) linking the youth purpose and teacher-focused educational effectiveness scholarship. Although the studies in this paper are of limited generalisability and are not conclusive because of the selective sample and anonymity of data, they can launch further discussion among researchers and practitioners on how to develop better practices to address purpose development. The findings provide a real-world snapshot of teachers' perceived options, thinking and actions to invest proactively in purpose-related endeavours.

Teachers often teach as they were taught, so teacher training has long-term implications for educating future generations (Thoonen et al. 2011). Interest and momentum are growing in teachers' power to make education more purpose oriented. Despite a general sense that purpose is not yet well infused into public schooling, teachers shared many encouraging ideas and practices with the research observers. Several teachers wanted to become more purposeful in their own work and lives. Several teachers wanted to take a longer term perspective and see their teaching efforts blossom for pupils long after pupils leave school. Several teachers already were experimenting with lesson designs to support dimensions of purpose more directly.

This paper suggests concrete ways *how* teachers are important, thus augmenting past survey-based studies (Bundick and Tirri 2014), dilemma-based cases (Seider 2012) and pupil interview studies (Moran et al. 2012) suggesting that teachers are important for purpose development. Most of the findings here corroborate other findings, such as the usefulness of particular purpose-related lessons, for example, on goal-setting and future orientation (Bundick and Tirri 2014); developing emotional maturity, prosocial skills and pupil self-regulation (Dar 2015; Flanagan 2015; Thoonen et al. 2011); and serving as opportunity 'scouts' and foresightful 'guides' into the future (Moran et al. 2012).

The teachers' ideas and perspectives presented here offer several opportunities for teacher educators to create a more coherent curriculum for purpose education. First, teachers pass along what they have experienced from their own schooling and past teachers. Thus, it is important for purpose to be part of teacher training so teachers consider purpose development as part of their job. Second, although teaching may be a generally purposeful vocation (Flores and Niklasson 2014), some teachers still struggle to define their own purpose in life or feel they don't have a language for purpose, so they are hesitant teaching it. Time during teacher training that allows novice teachers to reflect on their own life paths may create a strong emotional as well as intellectual foundation for guiding pupils to do the same. Third, teachers tend to conflate supporting a pupil's purpose (helping them become self-directed and self-regulating) with supporting or caring for a pupil (making them feel they belong and are valued members of a community). They express a desire for more guidance on how to turn over responsibility to the pupils to seek personal meaning, reflect on experiences and forge paths to their future. More training in 'coaching' pedagogy may be helpful, allowing teachers to practice being perceptive and responsive to the process of developing purposes.

Perhaps most far reaching in its implications, teachers expect themselves and their pupils to stay focused on the requirements of the immediate lesson or activity with its objective and prescribed outcome for the pupil. This short-term, self-oriented focus can mute the connection between current learning and long-term, personally meaningful life purpose that contributes to something larger than pupils' immediate needs. First, the future is often considered an abstraction that can be addressed 'later' because it is always at least a day

away. One benefit of a life purpose is that it gives the future a concrete picture to help teachers and pupils remember what is coming next. This picture can be a powerful motivator for pupils to persevere despite difficulty or setbacks (Moran 2014a). Second, teachers refer to 'community' as something to build and cherish. But their language sometimes focuses on 'providing' community for pupils rather than pupils 'contributing' community. Community is considered context rather than a product of individuals interacting. Thus, even if pupils are exposed to the idea of purpose, they often are not given opportunities to contribute to something larger than their own learning.

Framing feedback as reflection and evaluation of pupils' actual *contributions* at school highlights how pupils matter to the community. As they learn new skills and behaviours, they can contribute even more. Instead of purpose being exemplified only as career, with a resultant focus on opportunities that are encountered later in life, a contributory pedagogy allows teachers and pupils both to practice and exemplify purpose every day while still in school. The temporal disconnect in teachers' practices between 'learn now' and 'be purposeful later' may cause confusion for pupils. Teacher responses in Study 2, for example, showed that even teachers' descriptions of how their own purposes developed was an interactive, reciprocal, social process between events, experiences, reflection, opportunity, meaning-making and commitment *over time*. Series of 'nows' are the building blocks of what is possible 'later'.

Based on these two studies' findings, and with the intent of helping teacher educators develop 'next steps' in educating for purpose, two specific strategies are suggested: integrating the purpose dimensions to help pupils understand how they are related and build upon each other; and structuring lessons and activities based on pupils' applying learning to make contributions. These strategies do not repeat findings or define best practices, but rather suggest possibilities for teacher educators to build upon the findings in concrete ways.

Help teachers integrate the purpose dimensions

In general, teachers understood the four dimensions of purpose as *independent* concepts. There were ideas to address personal meaningfulness, *or* intentions and future visioning, *or* hands-on engagement *or* prosocial effect. Teachers considered 'meaning' as pupil's self-exploration and communication of opinions; 'intention' as self-efficacy and planning; 'engagement' as completion of assigned tasks, *or* sometimes real-world opportunities, *or* occasionally as pupils' taking full responsibility of a project. Teachers considered 'beyond-the-self impact' mostly in terms of their own behaviours, such as caring for pupils and belonging to the school community.

A few educational programmes, such as vocational-technical programmes or similar real-world experiences (Rathman 2008), incorporated *all* the dimensions of purpose: the work was personally meaningful and intentional because pupils *chose* the courses based on interest and expected future career. The work was engaging as pupils solved problems when they arose, and learned to deal with both disappointments and achievements. The work had beyond-the-self impact as pupils felt responsible for outcomes.

Despite this integration of purpose dimensions from an outsider perspective, the teachers themselves hadn't yet realised how these experiences tapped so many dimensions of purpose. Thus, the teachers still tended to focus on the 'parts' rather than the 'whole' of purpose

development. Yet, these programmes may be the ‘path of least resistance’ for introducing purpose within schools since the primary aspect lacking is an introduction of a purpose framework and purpose language (Andrews, Rathman, and Moran 2008). The structure, activities, individualised experiences and pupil agency already exist. Plus, past research suggests that teachers tend to enjoy experiential and problem-based learning formats more than passive traditional formats (Ribeiro 2011).

However, purpose education is likely to spread more widely through schools if it is not limited to special programmes. There seemed a strong need and desire to clarify how fostering purpose can be built up from its dimensional ‘building blocks’ by integrating simpler activities that teachers already recommended. For example, assignments addressing personal meaning and beyond-the-self orientation could be repeated every quarter. At the end of the year, pupils could analyse changes in their responses over the year, then imagine their further development into the next school year to strengthen their skill in intentionality. Such guided reflective practices are considered powerful for purpose development (Bundick 2011). Indeed, it is important for pupils to have the opportunity to reflect on experiential learning opportunities to understand how they might contribute to pupils’ own future plans or life purpose (Bundick 2011), which would be important to solidify such short-term engagements into *personally* meaningful pursuits (Moran 2015). Even instilling a habit in teachers and pupils to contemplate ‘why’ a task should be done can be helpful for finding or strengthening purpose because it puts the purpose in a wider context (Damon 2009).

Integration of purpose dimensions within and/or across activities can help solidify all of the dimensions. Some dimensions, such as personal meaning and engagement, were easier to conceptually grasp and to practice. They are easier to feel via emotions and to see via actions. More difficult are intention and beyond-the-self impact because they require imagining and perceiving the future and others’ perspectives. Small changes in lessons may be helpful. For example, rather than teachers trying to convince all pupils that the material is *generally* important, they could encourage pupils to individualise lessons. Teachers provide space for pupils to make lessons ‘their own’ by tying them to their own *specific* purposes. Similarly, rather than teachers justifying the value of education in terms of pupils’ self-centred benefit of ‘getting’ an education, they could orient pupils toward a positive contribution to the wider world, which simultaneously develops pupils’ meaning-making skills and other-focused perspective-taking skills.

Help teachers structure lessons as contributions to others

It may be helpful for teachers to structure lessons around pupil *contributions* (what pupils do that impacts others). Structuring opportunities for pupils to *apply* subject matter and skills in making a contribution addresses all four of purpose’s dimensions. This strategy also solidifies learning *why* knowledge and skills are important because pupils can evaluate the results of their contributions. Contribution goes beyond activity (hands-on or social interaction) and engagement (being interested and effortful in tasks) to include producing a beneficial outcome for one’s own and others’ well-being.

A contribution mindset makes salient the distinctions between who acts (agency), who benefits (impact) and long-term influence (momentum). Contribution reinforces the experience of persons-in-community (Flanagan 2015). Successful purpose development means teachers allow pupils to take responsibility for the effects of their choices and behaviour

(Thoonen et al. 2011). Training may be required to instil dispositions in teachers to allow pupils to perceive opportunities and community needs, act, gather feedback, reflect and make new meaning, solidify or adjust the purpose and repeat the process (Moran 2014a).

Although purpose is a cognitive representation of a person's desired future, it is supported and strengthened through emotional interaction and feedback from others (Malin et al. 2013; Moran 2014a). Purpose makes clearer how a person *matters* to others and a community. Teachers clearly matter to school communities, and many teachers in the sample took on the responsibility of being role models. Teachers repeatedly noted that they are at the 'heart' of education: the personal interaction between teachers and pupils provides emotional tenor to schooling (Lam et al. 2014). Teachers' caring is a stronger predictor than content knowledge or pedagogical skill for pupil school success (Dar 2015) and is strongly related to later community engagement (Flanagan 2015). Plus, teachers with more caring attitudes tend to be more excited about teaching (De Vries and Beijaard 1999) and developing their own teaching purposes (De Vries et al. 2014). Teachers' pedagogical strengths rely on emotional competence, not just cognitive skills, to stimulate empathy or prosociality (Dar 2015). Teachers can role model contribution, but they need to be clear what effects they want to have on pupils (Morgenroth, Ryan, and Peters 2015). At some point, the role-modelling must segue to pupils taking on the roles so that pupils' self-regulation can develop and pupils can perceive and evaluate feedback on their own contributions. This segue shifts the focus from *teachers'* to *pupils'* meanings and intentions. That is when purpose development can take off.

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