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Finnish student teachers' perceptions on the role of purpose in teaching

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ABSTRACT

This study identifies the nature of the purposes that Finnish student teachers of different subjects ($N = 372$) have for teaching and how these perceptions could inform teacher education. Earlier studies have shown that both American and Finnish students have found the role of their teachers to be very important in teaching and learning purpose. Finnish student teachers have also been found to be purposeful in their teaching. The data for this study were gathered in 2013 with quantitative questionnaires measuring different elements of purpose, such as purpose identification, goal-directedness, beyond-the-self orientation, and competence to teach purpose. Using K-Cluster analysis, four purpose profiles were identified among student teachers: Purposeful, Dabblers, Dreamers, and Disengaged. Student teachers of religious education were found to be the most purposeful in their profiles, while student teachers of mathematics differed from the others, with more than 40% having a Disengaged profile. The results indicate that student teachers of mathematics need special support for their purpose development, as well as education in purposeful teaching.

KEYWORDS

Student teachers; purposeful teaching; purpose in teaching; Finnish teachers

Introduction

In today's changing world teachers need to foster the holistic development of their students, including in cognitive, social, and moral dimensions. They need to equip their students with a variety of skills and the knowledge required for the future and for life; even more important is the need to nurture students in the ideals of a modern democratic society (Dewey 1927). The societal task of schools is to raise responsible future citizens, and its moral aspect represents a strong and significant dimension of this effort. Teaching is inherently a moral endeavour and should be a central part of teacher education; student teachers should become aware of the nature of this work and of their crucial role in its development (Toom, Husu, and Tirri 2015). For the moral aspect of the work, teachers need a sense of purpose to find their vocations educationally meaningful and to be able to foster purposefulness in their students (Bundick and Tirri 2014). Finnish teacher education has a strong value and knowledge base in the German tradition together with Anglo-American influences. The German *Didaktik* is based on the idea that any given topic can represent many different meanings, and many different topics can illustrate any given meaning. Yet there is no subject

without meaning, and no meaning without a subject (Hopmann 2007, 116). Meaning is what emerges when content is expounded in a classroom based on the teacher's methodological decisions. In this process, the teacher fosters the growth of the individual student. Hopmann (2007, 115) describes the process in the following way: 'The purpose of teaching and schooling is in this perspective neither to transport knowledge from society to a learner (curriculum), nor a transposing of knowledge from science or other domains to the classroom, but rather the use of knowledge as a transformative tool of unfolding the learner's individuality and sociability, in short: the 'Bildung' of the learners by teaching'.

The German concept of *Bildung* also refers to the holistic aspect of pedagogy. It includes both the development of an individual's talents and abilities as well as the development of a society. *Bildung* 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.

Educational researchers and practitioners argue that purpose development should be part of schooling (Koshy and Mariano 2011). In Finnish teacher education, the specific aim is to educate autonomous professionals who build their practice on research-based knowledge and ethical values (Tirri 2014). It is an approach that acknowledges the normative nature and context dependency of teaching. The teaching-studying-learning process is guided by the Finnish national curriculum and takes place in an institutional context, usually public schools. Teachers need a sense of purpose for their work in order to be educationally meaningful and to be able to foster purposefulness in their students. American studies show that the most strongly purposeful youth who do mention schooling as an influence often report their teacher as fundamental to the development of their purpose (Bronk 2012; Moran et al. 2012; Malin et al. 2013; Bundick and Tirri 2014). According to Finnish empirical studies, both practicing teachers and student teachers emphasise some *general purposes in teaching*, regardless of the subject matter (Tirri 2012; Tirri and Ubani 2013). All view themselves as responsible professionals whose task is to teach the basic knowledge of their subject. Furthermore, they view themselves as responsible for the holistic education of their students, including the students' personal and ethical growth. Practicing teachers seem to have a stronger emphasis on students than do student teachers, whose main concern is still their own mastery of the subject matter and the educational responsibility involved in teaching.

Some *subject-specific purposes in teaching* were also found. In our empirical studies with Finnish subject-teacher students and practicing subject teachers, the teachers and student teachers of mathematics both emphasise the importance of meeting the needs of different learners, for example, very gifted students and girls (Tirri 2012). Mathematical thinking can be seen as a basic skill in many sciences, and those who teach this subject want to promote that kind of thinking in order to give their students the best chances to succeed in school and beyond.

In previous American studies, young people were broken down into four groups according to their sense of purpose. Damon calls these groups the disengaged and non-purposeful, the dreamers, the dabblers, and the purposeful (Damon 2008, 59). In the context of teaching, *the disengaged* are teachers who express no purpose to their teaching nor do they show any signs that they are seeking purpose. Like the disengaged group in the American studies, some of these Finnish teachers might be detached, while others confine their interests to hedonic or ego-boosting pursuits that show little concern for the world beyond the self. *The dreamers* are teachers who express ideas about purposes that they would like to have, for

example, imaginative educational ideas, but who have done little or nothing to try out their ideas. They have idealistic aspirations related to teaching and learning, but have put no practical plans or tests into action to pursue their purpose in a realistic way. *The dabblers* are teachers who have engaged in activities that appear to be at least potentially purposeful, but who show little awareness of the meaning of these activities beyond the present. These teachers also show few signs of committing themselves to such pursuits over time. They often change their teaching method or philosophy of education without any coherent sense of what they want to achieve with their teaching. Their interests are too short-term and changeable to become the basis for purposeful teaching. *The purposeful* are those teachers who have found something meaningful to which to dedicate themselves, who have sustained this interest over a period of time, and who express a clear sense of what they want to accomplish in their teaching and why. They have found an ultimate goal that inspires their teaching efforts from day to day and helps them see the future in their career. These teachers have also taken concrete steps to achieve their ambitions and act according to their educational vision.

Research context: Finnish teacher education

Our sample includes student teachers from kindergarten, classroom and subject teachers' programmes. All universities in Finland have teacher education programmes for classroom teachers and subject teachers, and, since 1995, for kindergarten teachers, who are required to earn a bachelor's degree. Both elementary and secondary school teachers must earn a master's degree, and their academic status is the same. Kansanen (1999) describes the contents of research-based teacher education at the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Helsinki as including three large content areas: pedagogical content knowledge or subject didactics, the theory of education, and practice. These components are in reciprocal interaction, and their main organising theme, from the beginning of the programme to the end, is a research-based approach integrated into every course. Courses in systematic research methods are introduced at the very beginning of their studies. The research-based approach culminates in the writing of a required master's thesis. Class teachers (those teaching grades 1–6, pupils from 7 to 12 years of age) write their theses in the field of education, while subject teachers (who teach grades 7–12, with pupils from 13 to 18 years of age) choose a topic in their major from a subject they are teaching.

Finnish young adults, especially females, have always been interested in being teachers. Teaching has traditionally been a respected occupation in Finland, but more rigorous preparation has actually made it even more attractive to talented students. Today it is easier to be admitted to the faculties of law or medicine at the University of Helsinki than it is to gain admission to the classroom teacher education programme. At the University of Helsinki, fewer than 10% of applicants are accepted annually for classroom teacher education in the Department of Teacher Education. Classroom student teachers study education as their major and are selected on the basis of their academic achievement as well as their communication and social skills. The entrance examination includes written assignments, interviews, and pedagogical assignments. By contrast, the subject teacher applicants apply to the faculties in their respective subjects and choose teacher education later, usually after two years (Kansanen 2003, 87). It is more difficult to be admitted into teacher education in some subjects, such as religious education, than in others, such as mathematics, where there is a shortage of teachers (Tirri and Ubani 2013).

This article reports empirical findings on Finnish student teachers ($N = 372$) who study at the University of Helsinki. The data were gathered with an online purpose survey in 2013 at the beginning of the students' pedagogical studies. Our research questions are:

- (1) What purposes do Finnish student teachers perceive in teaching?
- (2) How do students in different programmes (kindergarten teachers, elementary school class teachers, and secondary school subject teachers) differ in their perceptions on the role of purpose in teaching?

How can purpose be taught?

Purpose is defined as a stable, long-term goal to contribute to the world beyond a self that is also meaningful to the self (Damon 2008; Damon, Menon, and Cotton Bronk 2003). This multidimensional understanding of purpose prerequisites that a person has searched and found a meaningful life goal (Steger et al. 2006). It also includes that one is committed, engaged and goal-directed in realising the purpose (see e.g. Ryff 1989). Two kinds of goals in life can be identified, one that has as its primary intent the benefit of the world beyond the self (a purpose) and another whose primary intent is to benefit the self (a self-oriented life goal). This conceptualisation of purpose extends Frankl's (1988) notions of responsibility and 'giving to the world,' which emphasise the essential nature of self-transcendent goals to experience purpose in its deepest sense. To this end, a purpose may function not only as a life aim, but also as a 'moral beacon,' which motivates a person to commit to and engage in pro-social, generative behaviours in adolescence and the years to come (Damon 2008). To live purposefully, one must understand their purpose(s) in life, plan and be future-oriented, and believe that one has the capacity to achieve their life's goals.

One of the most important foundations for teaching purpose is a teacher's understanding of their own purpose (Bundick and Tirri 2014). When *teaching purpose* a teacher helps students to find their own purpose in life in subject-matter taught or in life in general. This kind of teaching can be called 'purpose education' and it can be actualised in many ways and in many different contexts. Purposeful teaching, on the other hand, is intentional activity based on formal curriculum in pedagogical institution. In this context the teacher's main task is to build a didactic relation to the student's studying and learning processes. The teacher has the pedagogical and didactic freedom to use the methods with which the meaning of the subject being studied can best be illuminated. The meaning is the key to creating the didactic relation. It also provides the crucial basis for students to study and learn and thereby construct their relationship with the subject content. Thus, different subjects like mathematics, science, social science, languages, or religious education provide the contexts for teaching purpose (see Hopmann 2007). When a teacher illuminates the meaning of a subject, teaching can be described as *purposeful teaching* (Tirri 2012; Tirri and Ubani 2013). Thus, the key for purposeful teaching is a person's ability to illuminate the meaning of a subject and help students create a personal and meaningful relation to that subject. It is plausible that most teachers implicitly engage in *purposeful teaching*, but student teachers especially need education to be able to focus more on supporting the construction of their students' relationship to the subject content rather than on their own relationship to the content.

Data and methods

Participants

The data ($N = 372$) were gathered with an online purpose survey in 2013 at the beginning of Finnish student teachers' pedagogical studies. The student teachers were studying to become kindergarten teachers ($n = 58$), class teachers ($n = 60$), or subject teachers of Finnish ($n = 53$) in foreign languages ($n = 82$), social sciences ($n = 38$), religious education ($n = 29$), or math and science ($n = 52$). Most of the student teachers were females ($n = 288$; 77%). Mean age was 27 years ($SD = 7.21$).

Instruments

Bundick and Tirri (2014) have operationalised Damon, Menon, and Cotton Bronk's (2003) the purpose construct with three latent variables: a sense of purpose, goal-directedness and a beyond-the-self orientation. A sense of purpose was measured with two subscales, namely, the *presence of purpose* and the *search for purpose*, found on the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al. 2006). Both subscales had five items and were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). In line with previous studies, the items on both subscales which showed strong reliability as alpha values were *presence of purpose* .728 and *search for purpose* .885. Sample item for presence of purpose include an item such as 'My life has a clear sense of purpose' and for search for purpose an item such as 'I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life.'

To measure *goal-directedness*, a nine-item version of the Purpose in Life subscale of Ryff's Psychological Well-Being measure was utilised (Ryff 1989). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), and the alpha value was .784. 'Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them' is a good sample item for the measure of goal-directedness.

Beyond-the-self-orientation (BTS) was operationalised with two items measuring social life goals from Roberts and Robins (2000) 'Volunteering in the community' and 'Helping others in need.' Even though there were only two items, the alpha value was .640. The items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale in answer to the question: 'How important are the following goals in your life?' (1 = *not important to me* to 5 = *very important to me*).

Furthermore, Bundick and Tirri's (2014) instrument was used to assess student teachers' perceptions of their competence to teach purpose. This measurement is an operationalization of characteristics of predictors of purpose development. The original six items measured students' perceptions of teacher competencies for purpose, and five of the items were modified to fit teachers' self-ratings. The respondents rated the items on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The reliability value of the five items were $\alpha = .633$. Sample items include items such as: 'In my current school, I guide my students to reflect their purpose in life,' 'In my current school, I teach why a lesson or task or experience is important' and 'In my current school, I teach my students how to plan for the future.' Students were advised to answer these questions based on their perceptions on the role of purpose in their teaching and their expectations on their future students.

Table 1. Clusters of student teachers' purpose profiles.

		Disengaged <i>n</i> = 84 (23%)	Dreamers <i>n</i> = 54 (15%)	Dabblers <i>n</i> = 144 (39%)	Purposeful <i>n</i> = 90 (24%)	Levene; <i>F</i> , <i>p</i> , η_p^2
Presence of purpose (scale 1–7)	z-scores	–.28 (.87)	–1.40 (.86)	.16 (.70)	.85 (.46)	.000
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	4.77 (1.03)	3.45 (1.01)	5.28 (.83)	6.10 (.54)	115.077; .000; .48
Search for purpose (scale 1–7)	z-scores	–.52 (.82)	.51 (.77)	.69 (.58)	–.94 (.75)	.001
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	3.68 (1.07)	5.01 (1.01)	5.26 (.76)	3.12 (.98)	123.368; .000; .50
Goal-orientation (scale 1–7)	z-scores	–.21 (.77)	–1.51 (.85)	.32 (.67)	.60 (.72)	.308
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	5.22 (.57)	4.25 (.63)	5.62 (.50)	5.83 (.54)	108.370; .000; .47
BTS- Social goals (scale 1–5)	z-scores	–.97 (.81)	–.02 (.71)	.30 (.91)	.43 (.85)	.178
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	2.33 (.67)	3.12 (.59)	3.39 (.76)	3.49 (.71)	50.630; .000; .29
Competence to teach purpose (scale 1–5)	z-scores	–.98 (.78)	–.33 (.89)	.27 (.81)	.69 (.72)	.186
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	3.65 (.38)	3.97 (.44)	4.26 (.40)	4.47 (.36)	73.356; .000; .37

Results

Student teachers' purpose profiles

In order to identify the students' purpose profiles, a cluster analysis was conducted to classify the participants according to their sense of purpose; in other words, the level of presence of purpose, a search for purpose, goal-directedness, beyond-the-self-orientation (BTS), and competence for teaching purpose. A Quick Cluster Analysis with a K-means algorithm was utilised to form clusters. A four-cluster solution was selected, since it provided theoretically sound groups (Naes, Brockhoff, and Tomic 2010). Clusters were labelled according to the score means in line with Damon's (2008, 59–60) qualifications as (1) dabblers, (2) purposeful, (3) disengaged, and (4) dreamers. The profiles differed statistically significantly on clustering variables with effect size ranging from .29 to .50 (Table 1). Games-Howell's and Tukey's pairwise comparisons revealed that the profiles differed statistically significantly ($p < .05$) with the following exceptions: On *search for purpose*, dreamers and dabblers did not differ from each other ($p = .353$); on *BTS orientation* purposeful and dabblers did not differ ($p = .60$), nor did dreamers and dabblers ($p = .087$).

Figure 1 illustrates the profiles of the four clusters. *Purposeful* student teachers (24%) scored highest in presence of purpose and lowest in search for purpose, indicating that they had found their purpose in life and thus were no longer searching for it. They were also highly goal-directed and committed to realising their purpose, as well as being oriented toward others. Moreover, purposeful student teachers saw themselves as more competent than other groups to teach purpose to their students. The *Dreamers'* (15%) profile was almost the opposite of *Purposeful*, because the Dreamers scored lowest of all groups on presence of purpose and goal-directedness, which means that they had not found their purpose and thus they could not be committed to actualizing it. Instead, Dreamers were strongly seeking purpose and seemed to hope to find something enduring. Dreamers had to some extent beyond-the-self orientation, but they did not feel competent to teach purpose to their students.

Dabblers (39%) shared features with both the Purposeful and Dreamers, since they scored high on all elements of purpose. Dabblers had found a purpose and were committed to its

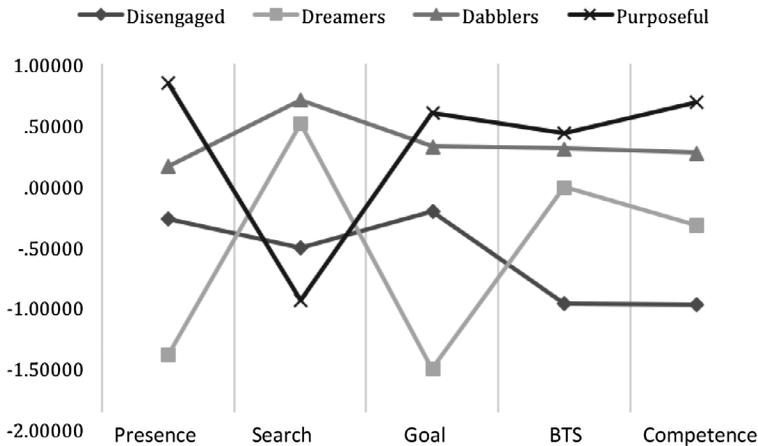


Figure 1. Student teachers' purpose profiles and means of z-scores.

implementation, yet they wanted to keep their options open and continue to search for new possibilities. Dabblers, like Purposeful student teachers, had a beyond-the-self orientation as well as a capacity to teach purpose to their students. *Disengaged* student teachers (23%) had not found their purpose, they were not searching for it, and their goal-directedness was also relatively low. Further, disengaged student teachers were the group least interested in social goals and thus lowest in beyond-the-self orientation and in competence to teach purpose.

The purpose profiles were found to be associated with student teachers' study programmes ($\chi^2(18) = 33.283, p = .015$). Figure 2 shows that most of the student teachers, regardless of their programmes, were dabblers. However, student teachers of mathematics and science and those teaching religious education differed from the other groups: 38% of the religious education student teachers were found to be purposeful, while over 40% of math and science student teachers had a purpose profile of disengagement, indicating that they did not have strong purpose-related visions, activities, or the confidence to teach purpose.

Discussion

This paper has investigated the various purposes that Finnish student teachers of different subjects have in teaching. The aim for Finnish teacher education is to educate autonomous teachers who have clear goals and a sense of long-term purpose in their work. Education for this kind of purposeful teaching includes opening up the meaning in each subject matter taught and guiding teachers to reflect on their teaching interests, something that could sustain them over a period of time. Education for purposeful teaching also includes discussions and reflections on the ultimate goal in teaching, which inspires teachers from day to day and helps them see the future in their career. The empirical findings among the Finnish student teachers ($N = 372$) indicate that the majority of them can be profiled as dabblers, persons who think they have found a purpose in their teaching, but are still open to new ideas and ready to change their teaching goals and aims. This open attitude encourages the kind of teacher education in which purpose is discussed with the dabblers and reflected on,

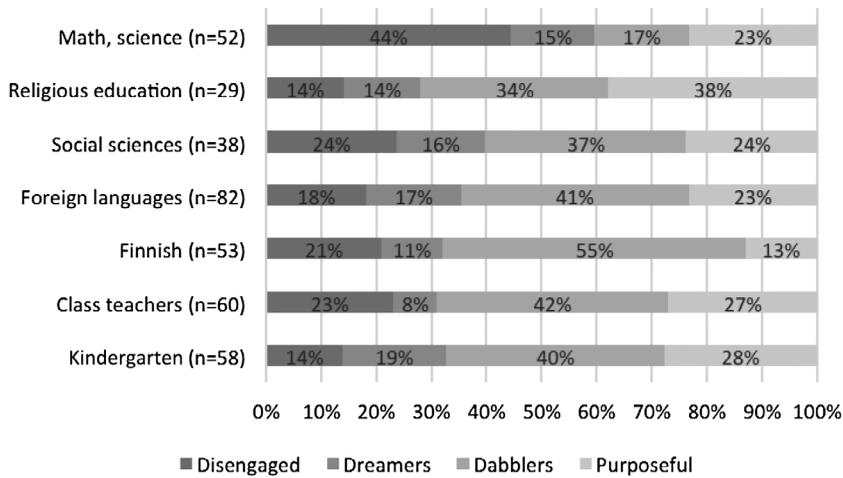


Figure 2. Finnish student teachers' purpose profiles and study programmes.

with the goal of guiding them toward long-term purposeful teaching. The second biggest group among the Finnish student teachers was the purposeful, those who had found a long-term goal and had a commitment to teaching. This is a very encouraging finding and reflects the high quality of the student population in Finland admitted to teacher education departments. The majority of this group viewed teaching both as a good profession and as a calling (Tirri, Husu, and Kansanen 1999).

In our sample, the student teachers of religious education most often demonstrated a purposeful profile, while student teachers of mathematics and science were mostly profiled as disengaged, indicating that they had no strong purpose-related visions, activities, or confidence in teaching purpose. This result supports our previous studies of student teachers and practicing teachers of religious education and mathematics in which similar trends were found (Tirri and Ubani 2013). The smallest group among the student teachers in this study was the dreamers, who were still searching for their teaching purpose. To meet the needs of this group, every study programme, from kindergarten to adult education, should implement education for purposeful teaching.

Both American and Finnish studies among students and teachers indicate that a teacher is a central figure in the purpose development of the youth. Moreover, the moral nature of teaching calls for purposeful teachers for our schools worldwide. This trend also challenges education for teaching all over the world to provide more pre-service and in-service education in purposeful teaching.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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