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# The Purposeful Teacher

*Kirsi Tirri*

## Abstract

In this chapter, a purposeful teacher is introduced as a goal in teacher education for the twenty-first century. Purposeful teacher is defined as a teacher with moral purposes. Purposeful teachers are ethical professionals who have both freedom and responsibility to make pedagogical decisions in the best interest of their students. Purposeful teaching is discussed in the Finnish context with some examples of the current educational challenges. The purpose profiles of Finnish student teachers are presented to inform the needs for purpose education for future teachers. Different approaches to teach purpose in the teacher education and in schools are introduced with examples from different countries. The didactic approach used in moral education is presented as a case-example to teach purpose in teacher education. The aims of twenty-first century learning call for purposeful teachers who actualize and model lifelong learning in their profession. A growth mindset in learning and ethical skills is introduced as important assets in the professional growth toward purposeful teaching.

**Keywords:** purpose, purposeful teaching, teacher ethics, Finland, twenty-first century skills

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the importance of purpose in teachers' professional conduct. Many authors have emphasized the ethical and vocational nature of teaching profession [1, 2]. In this chapter, teaching is presented as both a profession with professional competencies and a vocation with personal meaningfulness. The discussion is presented in the context of Finnish teacher education, where teachers are ethical professionals [3]. Finland was the first Nordic country to establish the ethical codes for teachers in 1998. During the last 20 years, these codes have been revised and updated. In these codes, the basic values for teaching profession are established. These values are dignity, truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, and freedom [4].

In 2017, Teachers' Union in Finland established the Comenius' Oath for teachers that would support teachers in their work and provide a concrete reminder of the ethical foundation of their profession [5]. Teachers in Finland are trusted and they can practice pedagogical freedom in their work if they observe the legislation and the curriculum guidelines. Also, the schools in Finland have a lot of freedom in curriculum development and pedagogical approaches. The Finnish principals and teachers rank among the most autonomous education professionals in Europe [6] who are responsible for supporting students' holistic development. The national core curriculum provides only the basic values and goals for schools to develop their own curricula and instructional approaches [7]. This kind of freedom can be

identified as a challenge, for example, related to curriculum integration, especially for the subject-teachers in Finland [8].

To be able to meet the challenges and requirements of ethical professionals, teachers need a long-term goal and commitment to teaching; in other words, they need to be purposeful in their work. The term “purpose” refers to “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is both meaningful to the self and of intended consequence to the world beyond the self” [9]. In this definition, purpose can be conceptualized along three dimensions. The dimensions are intention, engagement, and prosocial reasoning [10]. All these dimensions are needed to fulfill the criteria of a purposeful teacher. Purposeful teachers are ethical professionals with long-term commitment to their students and educational goals they intend to meet in their teaching. In this work, they need to find meaningful purposes for themselves that at the same time go beyond themselves and serve their students and school communities.

The purposeful teacher is always an ethical teacher with moral purposes. Our research data with both Finnish elementary and secondary school teachers indicate that teachers share certain features in their pedagogical thinking and teaching practice [11]. We have identified these collective features in teachers’ thinking to be field-invariant epistemological standards guiding their practical knowledge [12]. The sense of vocation provides teachers with a sense of personal identity and fulfillment referring to meaningful purpose in their work. Moreover, teachers have reported that they cannot separate personal and professional aspects in their practical reasoning. Their own moral character informs their moral reasoning, having an influence on how they interact with their pupils and providing long-term purposes in teaching. The professional rules and principles related to teachers’ ethical codes also help them in their pedagogical practice with their students and colleagues. Our empirical studies with both elementary and secondary teachers indicate that teaching is both a vocation with a deep personal commitment and a profession with clear rational principles. Purposeful teachers are those who can combine the vocational and professional aspects in their work.

In the following subsections, the current challenges in teachers’ work in Finland are discussed with the empirical findings on the purpose profiles of our future teachers. Some methods to teach purpose in teacher education and in schools are introduced with a more detailed example from Finnish teacher education. Finally, purposeful teacher is identified as a goal for teacher education in the twenty-first century.

## **2. Purposeful teaching in Finnish context**

The Finnish education system and teacher education are internationally recognized as high-performing without control and standardized testing [13]. The status of the teaching profession is very high in Finland, and teachers are trusted and respected. Beginning in the 1970s, the professionalism of teaching has been supported by an academic university education, with more and more trust given to teachers during the 1980s and 1990s through the decentralized curricula.

The teaching profession also attracts good students year after year. This is a unique advantage to teacher education in Finland by comparison with other countries [3]. Teacher education in Finland has become increasingly research-based during the last 40 years. The master’s degree given to both elementary and secondary teachers with thesis provides opportunities for teachers to continue their studies in the doctoral programs that Finnish universities have in their teacher education departments. The professors and lecturers in these programs teach future teachers

with scientific competence. They teach what they research and research what they teach. The results of their studies are published in leading international educational journals and monograph series. The faculty has pedagogical competence and most of them have been educated as teachers themselves. These developments have made Finnish teacher education very visible and competitive judged by international standards; for example, we have more international students applying to our doctoral programs than we can admit [3]. Lavonen lists several reasons why teaching is an attractive occupation in Finland. In addition to the academic status of teachers, they enjoy collaboration with and receive support from school leaders and communities. The strong culture of quality and the key role of teachers in assessment activities also support the professional ethos of teachers. Decentralization allows teachers to consider local contexts and to address diversity among the students they teach in flexible ways [13].

Ethical sensitivity can be identified as a core competent for Finnish teachers in teacher-student relationships [4]. The best interest of a student is guiding the teacher to understand different needs of all kinds of learners and especially those who need special care and guidance. With the youngest learners, the teacher needs viewpoints from the other adults who know the child in need. This means that the teacher works together with the adults responsible for the child. Team-teaching, cooperation between home and school, and other experts are needed to meet the diverse educational needs of students. Many times, the needs require the view of a school psychologist or some other expert. These relationships make real the African saying “It takes a whole village to educate a child.”

The professional attitude is present in the ethical codes in the teacher’s relationship to his or her work [4]. Accordingly, teachers should attend to their tasks responsibly and develop their work and evaluate their own activities. Teachers are also supposed to accept their fallibility and to be ready to revise their viewpoints if needed. Lifelong learning is necessary also in the ethical domain. Teachers in Finland have the right and responsibility to personal development and care. Teachers are also expected to respect their colleagues as members of a profession. A constant challenge in their work involves finding the balance between personal autonomy and the work community. In schools, teachers are advised to rely on the principles of mutual aid and support, understanding, and accepting the individuality of their colleagues. Teachers work together with the home, the surrounding community, and the larger society. This means that teachers have a relationship to the society in large and their work also guides the future of our society [4].

The current challenges in Finnish teacher education include the growing diversity among students in our schools and the expectations of teachers to meet the varied needs of diverse learners. This will demand high-level ethical and pedagogical skills to cope with these new challenges. Also, the learning environments are changing and teachers need to master the rapidly changing developments in information and communication technology to function in the same learning environments as their students. Teachers should also be able to prepare their students for the future by teaching them the twenty-first century skills. These skills can be defined as an integration of the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that all young people of our time are required to have [14].

In the Finnish national curriculum, seven areas of core competencies related to twenty-first century skills have been proposed, including: (1) thinking and learning to learn; (2) cultural competence, interaction, and self-expression; (3) taking care of oneself, managing daily life; (4) multi-literacy; (5) competence in information and communication technology; (6) working-life competence and entrepreneurship; and (7) participation, involvement, and building a sustainable future [7]. All these new learning goals call for purposeful teachers who have internalized the

ethical nature of their profession and who find personal meaning in meeting the needs of their students.

Finnish teacher education has been mostly influenced by the German tradition and lately more and more influences have been drawn from Anglo-American thinkers [15]. Hopmann defines “The German Didaktik” with the idea that any given matter or subject in school can represent many different meanings, and many different matters or subjects in school context can open any given meaning. But there is no matter or subject without meaning, and no meaning without matter or subject [16]. Meaning is created when the content is presented in a classroom with some pedagogical method the teacher has decided to use; meaning making becomes possible for students when teachers provide room for their pupils to reflect upon what is meaningful to them, and how the issues presented relate to their aims and goals in life. In this pedagogical process, the goals of each student are addressed with the pedagogical aim to foster purpose development.

The goal of Finnish teacher education is to educate pedagogically thinking teachers who can teach the contents of the curriculum and at the same time reflect on the meaningfulness of their teaching. Teachers should be able to take the perspective of their students and ask if their teaching is helping their students to find purpose in their studies and in their lives. We know that in Finland, both in-service teachers and student teachers find similar purposes in their teaching, regardless of the subject they teach [15, 17]. Finnish teachers are ethical professionals who want to make sure that their students master the basic knowledge of the subjects they teach. Moreover, they are responsible for the holistic development of their students, with the aim to educate moral citizens.

The Finnish studies on teachers’ purpose [18] among the student teachers (N = 372) indicate that most of them (N = 144, 39%) can be called as *dabblers*, teachers who have some kinds of ideas related to purpose in teaching, but they have not found anything permanent that would inspire them in their teaching and they are still searching for that. According to Damon, these kinds of teachers do not think about teaching with the future perspective. They are not committed to any goals with a long-term involvement. They try different teaching methods and educational philosophies without deep reflection on the goals and purposes of their teaching. They do not have a long-term or steady plan in their work that could function as a framework for purposeful teaching. In Damon’s youth studies, majority of American young people belonged to this group [19]. The open attitude among this big group of student teachers provides opportunities for teacher educators to discuss and reflect on purpose with them and support them in finding long-term purposes for their teaching.

The second profile (N = 90, 24%) among the Finnish student teachers was the *purposeful*. These were teachers who had found a long-term goal and commitment in teaching [18]. According to Damon, purposeful teachers are those who have clear goals for their teaching; the goals are long-term ones and give meaning to themselves, and the teachers can reflect on the goals and explain the reasons for them. These goals inspire the teachers in their everyday life and sustain them in the teaching profession. These teachers also have clear educational visions they have actualized in their teaching. The amount of purposeful student teachers in Finland is a very encouraging finding. It reflects the high quality of the student population in Finland admitted to teacher education departments. Most of this group viewed teaching both as an ethical profession and as a calling [1, 2].

The teachers who expressed neither purpose to their teaching nor showed any signs that they were seeking purpose were *disengaged* (N = 84, 23%). 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. We also found some differences among different teachers. 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 [18, 19]. The smallest group (N = 54, 15%) among the student teachers in our study was the *dreamers*, who were still searching for their teaching purpose. The dreamers in Damon's definition are teachers with ideas about purposes that they could have, for example, innovative teaching methods, but they have never put their ideas into practice. They can be very idealistic in their thinking, but they have never done anything in life to test those ideas in their teaching. The teacher educators should acknowledge these kinds of teachers and guide them to actualize their ideas toward purposeful teaching [18].

### **3. How can purposeful teachers be educated?**

Teachers all over the world need education in the specific competencies that make purposeful and purpose-oriented teaching possible. In a comparative study among youth, both American (N = 386) and Finnish (N = 336) students (13–19 years of age) acknowledged their need for teachers' support in finding purpose in their studies and in their lives [20]. A special issue on purposeful teaching around the world presents several articles from different countries on this topic giving concrete examples on culture-specific approaches to purpose education [21, 22]. For example, in Brazil, action research approaches are adapted with student teachers by using problem-based and design thinking methods to promote purposeful teaching [23]. In American context, service-learning is regarded as one of the most promising pedagogical approach for supporting purpose development of student teachers [24]. Also, in Korea, service-learning approaches are used in colleges to enhance purpose education among their students [25]. In a comparative study comparing Iranian and Finnish teachers' competence to teach purpose, the Iranian teachers taught their students reflection on purpose in life and plans, whereas Finnish teachers emphasized the importance and consequences of one's actions and decisions. In Finland, teachers' own purposefulness was related to their competence for teaching purpose [26]. Teachers in Finland, Iran and China all rated their competence to teach purpose highly, but Chinese teachers rated their competence much higher than their students rated them [27].

In her book, Malin argues that purpose can be taught in the classroom when the curriculum is responsive to students' questions and interests. She identifies purposeful projects as pedagogical tools to engage students in deeper learning about topics that are intrinsically motivating and personally meaningful to them. According to her, projects are meaningful when the content and activities are responsive to students' questions and curiosities. Projects become meaningful as students engage intentionally with the questions, ideas, or materials posed by the teacher, and the teacher shapes the project according to student's emerging ideas and interests as they take shape. Purposeful projects have the following characteristics: they are inquiry-driven, they are sustained over time, they involve reflection throughout, they are collaborative and community building, they elevate students' social awareness, and they set high expectations for students [24].

Tirri and Kuusisto [28] present a case-study approach to promote purposeful teaching in teacher education. The core of purposeful teaching in the classroom context is based on the didactic relationship between the teacher and the student's relation to content. To be able to create a didactic relation in learning, a teacher

needs to illuminate the meaning of the subjects she teaches to her students [17]. Purposeful teaching takes place when a teacher creates conditions for learning that help students to find personal meaning from the contents and subjects taught. The practical case method for purposeful teaching, the didactic approach, is modified from the methods used in moral education [29].

This specific case method has been used as part of a course in didactics, which is taught at the University of Helsinki at the beginning of all student teachers' (approximately N = 600) pedagogical education. The student teachers who take this course include kindergarten teachers, elementary and secondary school teachers, and adult education teachers with different subject specialization. The process starts with the writing task in which the student teachers write a story of a personally meaningful teaching or learning experience from their school years or university classes, the most significant one they can remember. The aim of the writing task is to help the student teachers to remember a personally meaningful case related to teaching and engage them in reflecting on it. Students' reflection is assisted with concrete questions related to the real-life teaching or learning experience they described. The emotions and situational details should be recalled with the help of questions to be able to relive them as authentic as possible.

The writing task is followed by a group work in which the students reflect on their purposeful teaching or learning experiences more systematically. The aim of this group work is to guide the student teachers to pay attention to the content and meaning of teaching. They should also think the ways a teacher used to illustrate the meaning of the contents. After that, students share their experiences and discuss situational factors and relational characteristics of the case. Helpful questions are provided to help the students in their analysis and reflection on the case. Following this phase, the student teachers discuss together all the purposeful teaching and learning experiences identified and issues related to them. The individual work is widened to collective reconstruction and argumentation of the cases with peers and teacher educators. This would help the students to deepen their arguments and gain a broader understanding of the cases presented. Other student teachers' experiences help individual students to build a holistic understanding of the case and situate it in a wider pedagogical and educational context. In best circumstances, some new understanding of the case emerges. The group work is followed by a reflective essay written individually by the students which is returned to the teacher educator. A case example of one teacher's reflection on her purposeful teaching experience is reported in details in [28].

#### **4. The needs of twenty-first century learners**

The purposeful teacher needs to adapt to the needs of twenty-first century learners. One of the twenty-first century skills students should learn in school is competence in information and communication technology. Finland has taken an active role since 1990 in implementing information and communication technology (ICT) in schools and educating teachers for their pedagogical use [3]. In the twenty-first century, Finnish education is emphasizing digital teaching and learning even more and investing in improving our teachers in this area [13]. This new emphasis is a challenge for many Finnish teachers and students. A purposeful teacher pays attention to her students' abilities, gender, prior knowledge, motives, and expectations to make learning meaningful for them. The skills related to information and communication technology differ a lot among students and teachers. Some of the students are more advanced in their use of information and communication technology than the teacher and others might not have any prior experience in this

area. The teacher needs to find new pedagogical approaches to teach technology for the diversity of learners and differentiate teaching according to students' abilities. The teacher might need in-service education to update her knowledge and skills and find purpose in learning new twenty-first century skills herself. The new information and communication technology has the potential to make learning more meaningful to some students, for example boys who do not have the patience to follow traditional teaching in classrooms or for talented students, who can advance faster in their studies. The needs for twenty-first century learners are the starting point for teacher's search for purposeful teaching.

## **5. Purposeful teachers for the twenty-first century**

The twenty-first century curricula in Finnish schools continue the trend of individualism and make room for purpose education for diverse learners in all school subjects. Education for purpose can be included for the school-based curricula integration projects in all grade levels. In teacher education, we want to educate teachers who can reflect on the educational purposefulness of their teaching from different points of views and help their students to find a purpose in their lives [20].

Lifelong learning is one of the aims for twenty-first century teaching and teachers need to find a meaning in their work that would be sustainable for the years to come. In the search of long-term purpose for teaching, teachers can profit from the growth mindset identified by Dweck [30]. Mindsets are beliefs that teachers hold about their most basic qualities and abilities. In a growth mindset thinking, a teacher believes that her cognitive skills, teaching competencies, and personal strengths can be improved. A teacher believes that purposeful teaching is possible with hard work and effort and she is ready to invest her time to reach that goal. A teacher with a fixed mindset thinking believes that her cognitive skills and teaching competencies cannot be improved and her personal strengths are also static. This kind of thinking prevents the teacher from finding a long-term purpose for teaching that would sustain in the changing world. Growth mindset is a key to lifelong learning and creative thinking [31].

The twenty-first century skills include an open-minded attitude from a teacher, a growth mindset, to learning to make it possible to be continually challenged to learn new things and guide the students in their search for purposeful learning. Purpose and growth mindset in learning needs to be complemented with ethical skills to combine excellence with ethics [32]. The ethical nature of teaching profession and the values underlying teachers' ethical conduct provide excellent ground for teachers' professional development with the goal of growing to be a purposeful teacher.

## **Notes**

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