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Merja Viljanen & Elina Kuusisto

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Merja Viljanen and Elina Kuusisto

Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

ABSTRACT

This mixed methods study examines life purposes of Finnish adolescents ($N = 843$) at the end of their basic education. Purpose is understood as a long-term intention to accomplish something of meaning to the self, which also contributes to society. The research showed that, despite problem talk about adolescents' mental health, Finnish adolescents seem to be exceptionally well aware of their life purposes. The quantitative data analysis identified four purpose profiles. Girls apparently wished to make an impact on the world, and belonged mainly to the Purposeful and Dreamers profiles, while most of the boys belonged to the Self-oriented and Disengaged profiles. Adolescents' written responses showed that two-thirds had identified life purposes and were pursuing them. Those aiming at an emotional state outnumbered those with some specific objective. The results are discussed from the perspective of purpose development and the holistic approach of the National Curriculum for Basic Education.

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Life purpose; life goal; youth; basic education; adolescence

> We are all here for ourselves, and you never know what is going to happen. I want to be able to look back on my youth later in life and comprehend how much I have accomplished and how I have always lived in the moment. Finnish adolescent spring 2020.

Youth and contested identities: a growing problem

This study contributes to the debate on the problems of youth and confirms the relevance of life purposes to adolescents' mental health and to society. To know who one is, where one is going, and why that matters are key to understand life purpose. Life purposes are formed by the surrounding culture or from individuals' own decision-making (Damon, 2008; Nurmi, 2004) and may therefore have a psychological, educational, sociological, theological, and philosophical dimension (Moran, 2019). In a changing world, life purposes are tested, rearranged, and reformulated; without a purpose, life is meaningless (Damon et al., 2003).

Purpose in life is found by doing things that are meaningful to oneself and doing those things so as to become meaningful to someone else (Martela, 2020). In other words, living in the world as a reflective being presupposes comprehension of the surrounding world, a sense of direction and of worth (Martela & Steger, 2016). A prosocial purpose is not just a societal issue (Ministry of the Interior, 2020) initiating a prosocial life purpose brings joy and seems to correlate strongly with life satisfaction and well-being (Bronk et al., 2018; Ryff, 1989). Well-being, on the other hand, consists of a sense of autonomy, the capacity to manage one's life and surroundings, personal

CONTACT Merja Viljanen merja.viljanen@tuni.fi University of Tampere, Åkerlundinkatu 5, 33014 Tampere, Finland

growth, positive relationships, self-acceptance, and feeling that one's life is meaningful (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Emerging adulthood is a socialization process moving toward an adult identity and purpose in life (Coté, 2014; Erikson, 1968; Tanner & Arnett, 2016). In 1948, Havighurst defined the development tasks of youth, which Salmela-Aro and Nurmi (2017) summarize as follows: identity creation, ideology adoption, educational choices, gender role assumption, self-perception, culminating in family and working life. The vast range of choices implies problems (Huhta, 2022; Karvonen et al., 2022), hence adolescents need adult support to enhance their sense of purpose in life (Bundick & Tirri, 2014).

Polarization in youth development processes shows some adolescents eager, conscientious, and ambitious, with others drifting aimlessly, lacking commitment to any goal, place, or relationship (Coté, 2014). Lack of control over one's life or lack of a goal or motivation may appear as underachievement and challenges socialization or living one's life in pure survival mode trying to beat "the natural selection" (Eryilmaz, 2018; Nurmi, 2004). It has also been suggested that without a healthy, proactive, and positive life purpose youth may fill the void with extremist ideology or criminality (Eryilmaz, 2018; Sumner et al., 2018). In this study, we aim to ascertain *the life purposes* of young people in the 2020s and how many of these can be considered noble or prosocial.

We focus on Finnish adolescents. The Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016) implements purposeful values: "While learning the pupils are building their identity, their understanding of humanity, worldview and philosophy of life and finding their place in the world" (p. 23). Supporting students' growth into responsible members of society is a core objective of Finnish legislation (Finlex, 2012). Achieving such objectives is challenging. Despite success in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and ICCS (International Civic and Citizenship Education Study) (OECD, 2019a; Schulz et al., 2018), gender equality concerns have arisen with girls outperforming boys by far in Finnish basic education (Helakorpi & Kivimäki, 2021; OECD, 2019b; Pöysä et al., 2018). Moreover, the OECD (2021) SSES (Survey on Social and Emotional Skills) raises concerns about Finnish girls, whose life satisfaction and socioemotional skills have declined significantly. Mental health problems in adolescence have become an issue in Finland (Kauhanen et al., 2023) necessitating more youth psychiatry services in the last decade (Gyllenberg et al., 2018). Reports by UNICEF (2021, 2022) shows that the state of mental health among youth has also declined globally since the COVID-19 pandemic.

When Marttinen (2017) identified personal goal profiles, she found that 40% of Finnish adolescents still had diffused identity at age 23. The largest profile, Property (40%), had wealth as the main life goal, the second largest with 24% (mainly boys) was Vocation, and the third (mainly girls) Social relationships and future education (23%). The remainder (13%) were Self-focused, scoring lowest on well-being. A study by Viljanen and Kuusisto (2021) revealed a different order in adolescents' life goals. Self-actualization emerged as most important, followed by happiness and a good life. Career and relationships came next. Property (9%), health (4%), travel (4%) or existential grounds were minor categories. In a recent American study, adolescents' purposes were related to family (37%), to improving lives (25%), to making creative differences in the world (13%) or to serving a higher power (11%) (Baumsteiger et al., 2022). Changes in priorities have been observed in Finnish Youth Barometers. In 2016 young Finns reported having a close friend as their most important life goal, as also in the 1998 and 2002 Youth Barometers. In the 2016 Youth Barometer mental balance and meaningful work emerged among the most valued life goals (Myllyniemi, 2016). In addition, in the 2020 Youth Barometer young people increasingly considered that everyone is responsible for their own welfare and that success in life depends on oneself (Berg & Myllyniemi, 2021).

Dropping out of basic education or having basic education as the only education may cause social exclusion leading to both human suffering and costs to society. On a societal level in Finland, this trend prompted a decision to raise the school-leaving age to 18, with upper secondary education mandatory and free of charge from autumn 2021 onwards (Finlex, 2020). Initiatives have been taken to combat this exclusion process. The National Youth Work and Youth Policy Programme

2020–2023 aimed to ensure young people a meaningful life and participation in society (Ministerial Working Group on Child and Youth Policy, 2020) and the National Action Plan for the Prevention of Violent Radicalization and Extremism 2019–2023 sought to influence adolescents as the most receptive to new influences, seeking a direction and purpose in life (Ministry of the Interior, 2020).

Pursuing a purpose in life brings more happiness than pursuing happiness itself (Damon, 2008). The World Happiness Report 2022 shows Finland as the happiest country in the world for the fifth successive year "with a score significantly ahead of other countries in the top ten" (p. 24). The claim notes the importance of trust in society and within society (Helliwell et al., 2022). As the report states: "there is a happiness bonus when people get a chance to see the goodness of others in action and to be of service themselves" (World Happiness Report, 2022, p. 41). Indeed, a totally self-oriented life purpose may diminish well-being or even cause depression (Marttinen, 2017).

This study investigates the life purposes of Finnish adolescents ($N = 843$) at the end of their basic education. This is a critical time for them because they apply for upper secondary education and must choose between vocational and academic tracks. Describing the findings and approaching the Finnish school system mindful of these life purposes affords a new perspective on its evaluation. Over 800 young people aged 15–16 reported on their life purposes in a survey in 2020, immediately after the first COVID-19 lockdown. The large sample size enables us to ascertain the *current state of life purposes* among Finnish adolescents based on Damon et al.'s (2003) definition and dimensions of the purpose in life.

Purpose as a multidimensional concept

Damon et al. (2003) proposed a definition of purpose in life in 2003 and a new line of purpose research. Damon et al. (2003) define purpose in life as "Purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self" (p. 212). The definition includes three dimensions: (1) purpose is a goal that makes one's life meaningful *(Intention)*, (2) it is pursued with perseverance *(Engagement),* and (3) it contributes to the surrounding society *(Beyond-the-self)* (Damon, 2008; Damon et al., 2003). If all criteria are met, a purpose can be deemed mature. One or two criteria suggest a precursor form of purpose (Damon, 2008; Moran, 2009).

Based on the concept of life purpose and operationalizing its dimensions, purpose profiles were formulated (Damon, 2008). Purposeful people have a life purpose and motivation to pursue it (20% of American youth). They have a vision of what to contribute to the world around them and why they are committed to this. Dreamers (25%) have visions and idealistic thoughts about their future but lack motivation to realize them. Dabblers (31%) have short-term changing interests and may participate in activities but lack long-term intentions. Disengaged (25%) have no long-time life goals and are content to drift – having fun suffices, or they are unaware of their purpose.

Moran (2009) operationalized purpose dimensions differently on the basis of prosocial reasons and engagement, namely Beyond-the-self Dreamers, Purpose, Non-purpose, and Self-oriented profiles. The Self-oriented profile differs most from Damon's. Adolescents in that group are committed to goals, but these are self-serving. A Finnish study ($N = 347$) proposed four purpose profiles with most young people belonging to the Dreamers and Self-oriented profiles and fewer were Purposeful and Disengaged (Tirri & Kuusisto, 2022). The most challenging group for educationalists is adolescents in the Disengaged or Nonpurpose profiles apparently lacking all dimensions of life purpose. They are difficult to engage, having found nothing that matters to them, and hence are at risk of societal exclusion or engagement in dubious purposes (Damon, 2008). This article stresses the importance of purpose development and presents the reasoning and actions of adolescents regarding their life purposes by answering the following research questions:

> RQ1 What kind of purpose profiles can be identified among the Finnish adolescents? (quantitative)

RQ2 How do adolescents describe, reason, and act upon their life purposes? (qualitative)
RQ3 How do qualitative and quantitative results align? (mixed)

Data and methods

The data were collected with an online survey in 2020 at schools in municipalities surrounding the Finnish city of Tampere. Permission for the study was granted by the municipalities and school principals. Since all participants were 15 or older, parents were informed about the study via the Wilma electronic platform used in home-school collaboration (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK, 2019). Before completing the questionnaire, students watched a motivational Youtube video, where the first author introduced the survey and encouraged adolescents to respond. At the beginning of the survey, respondents' informed consent was requested. Finnish 15–16-year-old 9th graders ($N = 843$) completed the survey on mobile phones under teachers' supervision. The response rate was 68%. We included all those responding to at least 51% of the questionnaire. In addition, 41 adolescents gave no consent and their responses were excluded from the data.

Demographic information on the participants appears in Table 1.

Demographic information shows that the gender balance between females ($n = 472$, 52%) and males ($n = 371$, 44%) was close to the national average, where 49% are females (Statistics Finland, 2022). Some ($n = 35$, 4%) reported their gender as other. Two-thirds ($n = 553$, 63%,) planned to continue to general upper secondary schooling, a far higher share than the national average, which in 2020 was 54% (Statistics Finland, 2022). In our sample, 33% intended to apply for vocational education and training while the national figure was 40% (Statistics Finland, 2022).

Quantitative instruments and statistical analyses

The first research question, concerning purpose profiles, was researched through Damon et al.'s (2003) three dimensions with instruments adapted from earlier studies (see Cotton Bronk, 2014, for a review of purpose instruments; see also Kuusisto et al., 2022, Kuusisto & Schutte 2022; Tirri & Kuusisto, 2016; Hedayati et al., 2017; Malin, 2022; Manninen et al., 2018). The development of purpose scales for Damon et al.'s dimensions was established in the Stanford Revised Youth Purpose Survey (Bundick et al., 2006) and later refined in the Claremont Purpose Scale (Bronk et al., 2018). In these projects, Steger et al.'s (2006) Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) was identified as the best means of measurement for investigating the first dimension, *intention,* indicating whether one has found a meaningful purpose for themselves. Also, as earlier studies recommend, to measure the second dimension, *engagement*, referring to plans and activities to realize one's purpose, we utilized items from Ryff's (1989) Purpose in Life instrument (PIL). To study the third

Table 1. Demographic information on participants ($N = 843$).

Participants	• Students aged 15–16 in final semester of basic education • 801 born in Finland • 42 moved to Finland from 20 different countries
Gender	• 427 (52%) female • 371 (44%) male • 35 (4%) other gender or did not want to answer
Plans for secondary education*	• 553 (63%) general upper secondary school • 278 (33%) vocational education and training • 30 (4%) other studies (i.e., dual qualification) • 2 (0.2%) not relevant

*At the end of basic education, students apply for upper secondary education through a common clearing house system.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the variables.

Variables		α	*N*	*M*	*SD*	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
INTENTION (Dimension 1)		**.880**	**843**	**4.8**	***1.6***	**1**	**7**	**−0.67**	**−0.21**
MLQ1	I understand my life's meaning.		843	5.0	1.7	1	7	−0.86	0.012
MLQ4	My life has a clear sense of purpose.		843	4.8	1.7	1	7	−0.71	−0.27
MLQ5	I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful.		843	4.7	1.8	1	7	−0.55	−0.57
ENGAGEMENT (Dimension 2)		**.628**	**843**	**4.8**	**1.1**	**1**	**7**	**−0.46**	**0.36**
PIL3	I am an active person in carrying out the plans I set for myself.		843	4.8	1.5	1	7	−0.67	−0
PIL6	I enjoy making plans for the future and working to make them a reality.		843	4.9	1.5	1	7	−0.74	0.094
PIL8	Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them.		843	4.6	1.4	1	7	−0.29	−0.17
BEYOND-THE-SELF (Dimension 3)		**.836**	**843**	**4.8**	**1.4**	**1**	**7**	**−0.55**	**0.07**
CPS9	How often do you hope to leave the world better than you found it?		843	4.8	1.6	1	7	−0.61	−0.16
CPS10	How often do you find yourself hoping that you will make a meaningful contribution to the broader world?		843	4.7	1.6	1	7	−0.58	−0.14
CPS11	How important is it for you to make the world a better place in some way?		843	4.9	1.5	1	7	−0.66	0.034

dimension, *beyond-the-self,* meaning motivation to contribute to others, we used items from the Claremont Purpose Scale (CPS) by Bronk et al. (2018). Three items per dimension were evaluated on a Likert scale 1–7 (1 = totally disagree, 7 = totally agree). Items and their descriptive statistics appear in Table 2, including means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum scores, skewness, kurtosis of all variables, and alpha values of sum variables. Even though the psychometric properties of the scales seemed to be at a good level, the alpha value for items measuring *engagement* was below the often-considered adequate level of .65 - .80 (Vaske et al., 2017). Also, in the earlier studies, alpha values of PIL were found to be somewhat lower than in other purpose instruments (e.g., Kuusisto et al., 2023). However, it should be noted that in the latent profile analysis we utilized individual items, not sum variables (see Malin, 2022). Table 3 shows Spearman's correlations of the items which were mostly statistically significant, varying between .092 and .690. Only one item measuring the *beyond-the-self* dimension (CSP9) did not correlate with the items measuring *intention* (MLQ1, MLQ4, MLQ5). Gender was utilized as a dummy variable: gender (1 = male, 0 = female). Students reporting other gender ($n = 18$) or omitting this question ($n = 17$) were not included in the statistical analysis due to small sample sizes.

Profiles were created with latent profile analysis (LPA) inspired by Malin's (2022) purpose study. The analysis was computed with Mplus 8.7 program (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017), which can be used in person-oriented analysis to study what kind of purpose profiles (latent categorial variable) can be identified among students. In other words, our aim was to group together students with similar response styles. We utilized maximum likelihood method with robust standard error (MLR), which can be utilized when the data is not entirely normally distributed.

Table 3. Spearman's correlations.

	MLQ1	MLQ4	MLQ5	PIL3	PIL6	PIL8	CPS9	CSP10
MLQ1	–							
MLQ4	.685**	–						
MLQ5	.653**	.784**	–					
PIL3	.339**	.386**	.362**	–				
PIL6	.307**	.380**	.335**	.522**	–			
PIL8	.214**	.212**	.192**	.289**	.280**	–		
CPS9	.035	.042	.049	.162**	.252**	.188**	–	
CPS10	.092**	.109**	.113**	.268**	.342**	.223**	.625**	–
CPS11	.137**	.148**	.121**	.296**	.332**	.228*	.594**	.690**

**$p < .01$.

The analysis was computed in three phases: The optimal number of profiles was studied iteratively. We tested solutions with 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 profiles with Bayesian information criteria (BIC) and sample size adjusted Bayesian information criteria (aBIC), of which the lowest values refer to the best solutions. Bootstrapped likelihood ratio test (BLRT) and Vuong-Lo-Mendell-Rubin (VLMR) likelihood ratio test were used. Significant *p*-value indicates the suitability of the model. Further, the final model was chosen based on theoretical soundness (Morin et al., 2016). Thirdly, we studied how female and male students differed in their allocations to profiles. We utilized DCAT method in Mplus (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014) that resembles crosstabulation capable of detecting male and female students' probabilities of profile memberships while also acknowledging the latent nature of the profiles.

Qualitative instruments and content analysis

The second research question about how adolescents describe, reason, and act upon their purposes was investigated with instruments from earlier studies (Magen, 1998; Moran, 2014). The qualitative data included written responses to three questions: 1. What do you think is your life purpose, or the closest thing you have to a life purpose? *(what)* 2. Why do you want to accomplish this life purpose? *(why)* and 3. Describe any plans or actions you are taking right now to accomplish your purpose *(act)*.

Responses were examined with qualitative content analysis in Excel (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Life purposes were coded in three levels according to the theory of Damon et al. (2003). First, we noted if the response identified a purpose (*has a purpose*). *No purpose* was coded when there was no answer, the respondent did not know, mentioned death as a life purpose, gave a facetious answer or comment without any purpose. Descriptions of life purposes *(has a purpose)* were inductively coded either as *state of mind* if the students described purposes referring to feelings or hopes or as *specific content* such as family, studying or career. Our analysis differs from Damon's analysis (2008) in that we suggest that state of mind is a life purpose as also is a specific goal. We consider immaterial life purpose as personal fulfillment and accomplishment. Further responses with state of mind and specific content were deductively coded for their direction, whether reflecting a self-orientation *(self)* or contributing to others, indicating a beyond-the-self orientation *(other)* (Table 4).

The following quotation shows how a response could include several units of analysis related to the purpose and whether it indicated a self or beyond-the-self orientation:

> *To get a dream job* [has a purpose/ SPECIFIC / self] *and live happily* [has a purpose / STATE-OF-MIND / self]. (female student's response to the question *what*, ID-658)

The same codes, *exhibits purposeful reasoning or an action / no purposeful reasoning or an action*, *state of mind/specific content* and *self/other* were utilized in analyzing reasoning (responses to the question *why*) and engagement (question on actions to accomplish purpose). The following examples show reasoning and engagement.

> *Because I like helping others* [has a purpose/SPECIFIC/other] *and it makes me feel good* [STATE-OF-MIND/ self]. (female student's response to question *why*, ID-163.)

> *To become a good musician* [has a purpose/SPECIFIC/self], *I will practice every day* [SPECIFIC/self] (male student's response to question on *activities*, ID-5).

Table 4. Description of the content analysis of the written responses.

LEVEL 1	**Has a purpose**				**No purpose**		
LEVEL 2 inductive analysis	State-of-mind		Specific content		Do not know, no answer	to die, death	irrelevant or facetious comment
LEVEL 3 deductive analysis	focus on self	Focus on other	focus on self	focus on other			

Table 5. Description of the content analysis of the written responses and measures of agreement (**κ** = Kappa values).

Contents of written responses	Coding categories	κ
What is a purpose, *Intention*	**HAS PURPOSE**	.870
	(a) purpose as a state-of-mind	
	- self-oriented	1*
	- other-oriented	.000 [a]
	(b) purpose with a specific content	
	- self-oriented	1
	- other-oriented	.000 [a]
	NO PURPOSE	.875
	- no or do not know	1
	- death, to die	1
	- facetious response	1
Why accomplish it, *beyond-the-self*	**HAS REASONING**	.856
	(a) reason based on a state-of-mind	
	- self-oriented explanation	1
	- other-oriented explanation	1
	(b) reason with a specific content	
	self-oriented explanation	1
	other-oriented explanation	1
	NO REASONING	.856
	- no or do not know	1
	- death, to die	1
	- facetious response	1
Plans and actions, *engagement*	**PLANNED ACTIONS**	.924
	(a) actions based on a state-of-mind	
	- and self-oriented explanation	1
	- and other-oriented explanation	1
	(b) actions with specific content	
	- and self-oriented explanation	1
	- and other-oriented explanation	1
	NO PLANNED ACTIONS	.898
	- no or do not know	1
	- death, to die	1
	- facetious response	1

*No discrepancies between coders.
[a]No discrepancies between coders, but also no responses in this category.

The first author coded the entire dataset and the second author 10% of it. Inter-rater reliability was tested by Cohen's Kappa analysis (McHugh, 2012). The results were discussed, and necessary adjustments made. Kappa values were over .856, indicating good reliability. All kappa values can be found in Table 5.

Triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative data

Triangulation of the data is a way to strengthen the reliability of the study and to examine how the quantitative instruments and qualitative responses align in youth purposes (Creswell, 2015). The qualitative data were cross-tabulated with the LPA profiles and subjected to Pearson's Chi-square tests in SPSS. The standardized residuals assisted in identifying which groups confirmed statistically significant results in the Chi-square test. When the standardized residual was |2| or more it indicated a statistically significant contribution to the matter (MacDonald & Gardner, 2000).

Results

RQ1. What kind of purpose profiles can be identified among Finnish adolescents?

Table 6 presents the statistical indicators for the LPA models. We estimated models with one to seven profiles (Table 6). With nine items, the *p*-value of the VLMR test indicated models with two and four profiles to be the most suitable ones while indicators of BIC, aBIC, and BLRT

Table 6. Statistical indicators for LPA models.

#of profiles	Loglikelihood (df)	*p* VLMR	*p* BLRT	BIC	aBIC	Entropy
1	−14273.500 (18)			28668.266	28611.104	
2	−13561.064 (28)	0.0000	0.0000	27310.763	27221.844	0.881
3	−13325.409 (38)	0.3965	0.0000	26906.824	26786.148	0.889
4	−13025.393 (48)	0.0002	0.0000	26374.160	26221.727	0.849
5	−12923.375 (58)	0.3315	0.0000	26237.494	26053.304	0.827
6	−12822.333 (68)	0.2068	0.0000	26102.779	25886.833	0.822
7	−12756.409/−4032.062/−4033.515/ −4041.225/−4043.324 (78)	0.3671	0.0000	26038.300	25790.597	0.840

would have supported even more profiles. We additionally checked the "elbow plot" (Morin et al., 2016) of BIC values that graphically showed the four-profile model to be the best option and no additional value of including fifth or more profiles. Further, the four-profile model was theoretically the most plausible and interpretable option.

Figure 1 presents the four-profile model. Means with standard errors appear in Table 7. The results show that 41% of the adolescents belonged most probably to the Purposeful profile, (referring to a mature purpose): these adolescents had found meaningful purposes, were engaged in

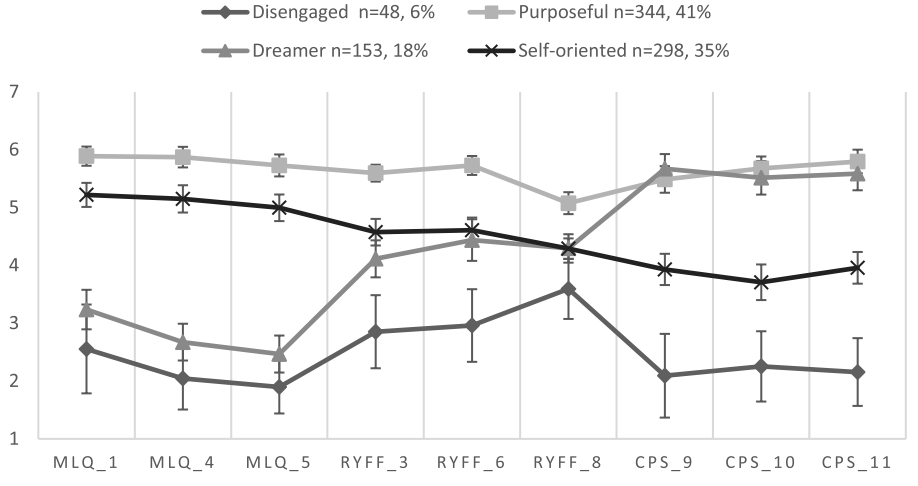

Figure 1. Purpose profiles of Finnish adolescents with means and ±2x standard errors.

Table 7. Means of adolescents' purpose profiles with 95% confidence intervals.

DIMENSIONS	Disengaged (*n* = 48, 6%)		Dreamer (*n* = 153, 18%)		Self-oriented (*n* = 298, 35%)		Purposeful (*n* = 344, 41%)	
Variables	*M*	*S.E.*	*M*	*S.E.*	*M*	*S.E.*	*M*	*S.E.*
FOUND								
MLQ1	2.56	0.38	3.24	0.17	5.22	0.1	5.89	0.08
MLQ4	2.05	0.27	2.67	0.16	5.15	0.12	5.87	0.09
MLQ5	1.9	0.23	2.47	0.16	5	0.12	5.73	0.1
ENGAGEMENT								
PIL3	2.85	0.32	4.11	0.16	4.57	0.12	5.6	0.07
PIL6	2.96	0.31	4.44	0.18	4.61	0.11	5.73	0.08
PIL8	3.59	0.26	4.29	0.12	4.29	0.09	5.08	0.1
BEYOND-THE-SELF								
CSP9	2.09	0.36	5.67	0.13	3.93	0.14	5.49	0.12
CSP10	2.25	0.3	5.51	0.15	3.71	0.15	5.68	0.1
CSP11	2.16	0.29	5.59	0.14	3.96	0.14	5.8	0.1

realizing them and contributing beyond the self. The second largest group was Self-oriented (35%). They had found meaningful goals and were also actualizing them, but for them contributing to others was not equally important. Some students were Dreamers (18%), scoring highest on their wishes to contribute to a better world, but their sense of purpose was low, indicating that they had not yet found a (meaningful) purpose even though they might have participated in purpose-related activities. The smallest group was the Disengaged (6%) profile, who scored low on all three dimensions.

The most homogeneous group was Disengaged; mean probability of profile membership was 97% and only one person had below 70% probability (Table 8). In the Dreamer profile mean probability was 92%, in the Purposeful profile 91%, and in the Self-oriented profile 89%, thus profile memberships were relatively clear, but not for all. For example, some students had 56% probability of being placed in the Self-oriented profile and 44% probability of being placed in the Purposeful profile, suggesting similarities between these profiles.

Table 9 presents probabilities of young people's being placed in the profiles studied with DCAT analysis in Mplus. Overall, there were statistically significant differences between females and males in the groups. The probability of females being assigned to the Dreamer and Purposeful profiles and males to the Disengaged and Self-oriented profiles was statistically significant ($p < .01$) (Table 9). However, the Disengaged and Self-oriented groups did not differ in gender distribution; males were in the majority in both.

RQ2. How do adolescents describe, reason, and act upon their life purposes?

According to the qualitative responses, Finnish adolescents have a high sense of purpose. Table 10 shows that 70% of the adolescents ($n = 589$) reported having a purpose in life, 63% ($n = 579$) were able to account for this purpose and 64% ($n = 541$) were pursuing it. Hence, one third were unable to identify, reason their purpose or pursue it (Table 10).

Table 10 shows how those identifying a life purpose demonstrated a strong self-orientation in their responses. This self-orientation was evident in purpose content (*what*), in reasoning (*why*) as well as in actions (*act*). Instead, beyond-the-self orientation was relatively rare, only 0–3 percent mentioned benefiting the common good. The content of most life purposes reflected a *state of mind* ($n = 357$, 42%). Adolescents valued happiness and self-actualization, and only few had existential/religious aims, as the following examples demonstrate:

> To live a happy and well-balanced life. (male student's response to question *what* - ID 760)

Table 8. Probabilities of belonging to the profiles.

	1	2	3	4
1 Disengaged	0.973	0.000	0.007	0.020
2 Purposeful	0.000	0.913	0.012	0.075
3 Dreamer	0.016	0.025	0.925	0.035
4 Self-oriented	0.007	0.078	0.022	0.894

Table 9. Probabilities of female and male adolescents belonging to purpose profiles.

		Probability	S.E.	Chi-square tests between gender - probabilities within profiles
Disengaged	Female	0.329	0.077	
	Male	0.671	0.077	Disengaged-Purposeful $\chi^2(1) = 8.934$, $p < .01$
Purposeful	Female	0.573	0.030	Disengaged-Dreamer $\chi^2(1) = 21.501$, $p < .001$
	Male	0.427	0.030	Disengaged-Self-oriented $\chi^2(1) = 1.482$, $p = .223$
Dreamer	Female	0.749	0.042	Purposeful-Dreamer $\chi^2(1) = 10.736$, $p < .01$
	Male	0.251	0.042	Purposeful-Self-oriented $\chi^2(1) = 7.540$, $p < .01$
Self-oriented	Female	0.433	0.037	Dreamer-Self-oriented $\chi^2(1) = 31.097$, $p < .001$
	Male	0.567	0.037	

Table 10. Categories and directions of life purposes in written responses.

Contents of responses		PURPOSE AS A STATE OF MIND		SPECIFIC CONTENT		Do not know *n* (%)	Death, to die *n* (%)	Facetious response *n* (%)	Total
		Self *n* (%)	Other *n* (%)	Self *n* (%)	Other *n* (%)				*n* = 843 (%)
What	Has a purpose	357 (42)	24 (3)	288 (34)	16 (2)				**589*(70)**
	No purpose					166 (20)	30 (4)	58 (7)	**254 (30)**
Why	Reasoning	455 (54)	0 (0)	133 (13)	23 (3)				**579 (63)**
	No reasoning					200 (24)	10 (1)	55 (7)	**264 (31)**
Act	Actions to pursue	188 (22)	0 (0)	360 (43)	4 (1)				**541 (64)**
	No actions					244 (29)	4 (1)	54 (6)	**302 (36)**

* Written responses might belong to several content categories.

> To be happy, healthy, fall in love, and do things that I enjoy. I also want my loved ones to feel good too. (female student's response to question *what* - ID 134)

The latter example also shows how some students ($n = 24$, 3%) included others in their purposes, revealing a beyond-the-self orientation.

Some respondents mentioned *specific content* showing more concrete goals. These were about benefiting oneself ($n = 288$, 34%) rather than others ($n = 16$, 2%). Specific content included work, studies, family, and property.

> To get a good job where I am happy and a family. And a fine car is a bonus. (male student's response to question *what* - ID 881)

Specific content comprised materialistic, comprehensible, ordinary life items of adult life. Responsibility for one's work, home, family, and funds are traditional Finnish signs of maturation (Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 2017).

The highest level of self-orientation was manifest in *reasoning* the state-of-mind ($n = 455$, 54%) related purposes meaning a feeling or hope for self-actualization guided rationalizations in over half of the Finnish adolescents. The following quotations show how respondents explained their willingness to pursue their purposes with positive emotions and hopes for the future.

> I am ambitious and I want to make my mark and to be remembered when I die. (female student's response to question *why* -ID 96)

> Because it is the pleasantest way to live life. Nothing is for free, so you need to work for it, but when you know pretty much where you are going, it is not too difficult to navigate to your destination. (male student's response to question *why* - ID 120)

Reasoning of the *specific content* manifest some beyond-the-self oriented ($n = 23$, 3%) explanations:

> In my youth I want to fulfill myself with volleyball and sports. But at the same time, I want to study to be a good and caring doctor. (female student's response to question *why* - ID 574)

Pursuit of a purpose was more often content-related ($n = 360$, 43%) with a self-orientation:

> I want to study to be either an architect or a game programmer in the future. I have practiced drawing, painting and coding. (male student's response to question on *activities* - ID 47)

> I have been thinking about upper secondary education, then university and then moving abroad. (female student's response to question on *activities* - ID 33)

Specific contents were more concrete aims, hence ideas about pursuing these were also concrete.

Contents reflecting a state of mind were not related to actions in equally many responses but those who acted upon state-of-mind purposes ($n = 188$, 22%) were only interested in benefiting themselves; none of them were inclined to contribute to others.

> To live a good life. (male student's response to question *what* - ID 517)

> I will take vocational education and training and study for about three years, then work for a while and do my military service. I will study well and focus on one thing at a time. (male student's response to question on *activities* - ID 517)

Our results show that by the end of basic education one-third of the adolescents had not settled on a purpose. Those responses ($n = 166$, 20%) stated no purpose or why to pursue one ($n = 200$, 24%), or had no ideas for activities ($n = 244$, 29%).

> I don't want to have any purpose in life, because I don't find it relevant, and it ties me down too tightly. (female student's response to question *why* - ID 928)

> Too complicated to explain. (male student's response to question on *activities* - ID 780)

> To live without any boundaries and according to my own rules. To die young. (other gender student's response to question *what* - ID 721)

Some reported not knowing their purpose, made some facetious comments or mentioned death as a life purpose. A few respondents described death or to die as their purpose ($n = 30$, 4%), as a reason for their purpose ($n = 10$, 1%) for their actions ($n = 4$, 1%). It follows that in the absence of a purpose there will be no actions or reasoning. Noteworthy, some adolescents had identified a life purpose but did not reason or pursue it.

Comparing written responses with gender revealed that over *three quarters of girls* and almost *two-thirds of boys* expressed purposefulness in their responses. Interestingly, within a small sample of respondents reporting *other gender*, two-thirds lacked purpose, reasoning, and action. These gender-related results are statistically significant in Pearson's Chi-square ($p < .001$) as Table 11 shows.

Table 11 shows that girls demonstrated purposefulness, suggesting that they had thought about their purposes. Happiness and enjoying life were mentioned in many responses by all genders, suggesting that state of mind is a valid argument for adolescents. Below are responses to life purpose, reasoning, and pursuing it from the same female participant, giving a good insight into the adolescents' response style.

> To enjoy life and succeed in things I am good at. (female student's response to question *what* - ID-757)

> Being constantly happy is not possible, but I want to reach out for things that make me happy and make me feel important. (female student's response to question *why* - ID 757)

> I will go to upper secondary school and to university after that. I hope I will find a good job, sometimes travel and raise a family. Happiness is after all a relative matter and my life purposes may be different after 20 years. (female student's response to question on *activities* - ID-757)

Triangulation of the purpose profiles and written responses

We used triangulation to study how the quantitative and qualitative responses aligned. The results of Chi-square tests and standardized residuals in Table 12 suggest that adolescents in the Purposeful profile had found their purpose and could reason and pursue it consciously statistically significantly more often than respondents in other profiles (Table 12). Conversely, respondents in the Disengaged profile had not statistically significantly identified their purpose in their written responses and had no reasons for pursuing it or acting accordingly. Dreamers and Self-oriented respondents did not differ statistically significantly from each other or from other profiles. In the quantitative data analysis, the differences between profiles were more marked than in the qualitative responses.

Typically, the responses in the Purposeful profile were very well constructed, although the beyond-the-self dimension was remarkably less prominent than the statistical analysis demonstrated. The Self-oriented profile showed clarity and respondents used short sentences in addition

Table 11. Frequencies and percentages of Finnish adolescents' written responses manifesting a life purpose, reasoning, and pursuing it.

		Female $n = 427$ (52%) SR	Male $n = 371$ (44%) SR	Other $n = 35$ (4%) SR	Pearson's Chi-square tests of probabilities within gender
what	Has a purpose	343 (78.5)* **2.2**	232 (62.5) −1.7	13 (37) **−2.3**	$\chi^2(1) = 42.614$, $p < .001$
	No purpose	94 (21.5) **−3.4**	139 (37.5) **2.6**	22 (63) **3.5**	$\chi^2(1) = 43.545$, $p < .001$
why	Reasoning	333 (76) 1.9	233 (63) −1.4	13 (37) **−2.3**	$\chi^2(1) = 33.634$, $p < .001$
	No reasoning	104 (24) **−2.8**	138 (37) **2.0**	22 (63) **3.3**	$\chi^2(1) = 33.634$, $p < .001$
act	Actions to pursue purpose	311 (71) 1.8	218 (59) −1.3	12 (34) **−2.2**	$\chi^2(1) = 27.625$, $p < .001$
	No actions to pursue purpose	126 (29) **−2.4**	153 (41) 1.7	23 (66) **3.0**	$\chi^2(1) = 26.567$, $p < .001$

SR standardized residuals, |2| or more indicate a statistically significant contribution.
* share of this gender reporting a purpose.

Table 12. Triangulation of purpose profiles and written responses.

	what: *Has a purpose* *n* (%) *SR*	*why:* *Reasoning* *n* (%) *SR*	*act:* *Acts upon it* *n* (%) *SR*
Purposeful ($n = 344$, 41% of adolescents)	278 (81) **2.5**	272 (79) **2.3**	258 (75) **2.5**
Self-oriented* ($n = 298$, 35% of adolescents)	199 (67) −0.6	190 (64) −1.0	177 (60) −1.0
Dreamer* ($n = 153$, 18% of adolescents)	93 (61) −1.3	101 (66) −0.4	90 (59) −0.8
Disengaged ($n = 48$, 6% of adolescents)	18 (38) **−2.7**	16 (33) **−3.0**	16 (33) **−2.7**
Total	588 (70)	578 (69)	541 (64)
Pearson's Chi-square tests	$\chi^2(1) = 50.695$, $p < .001$	$\chi^2(1) = 49.007$, $p < .001$	$\chi^2(1) = 40.893$, $p < .001$

SR standardized residuals, |2| or more indicates a statistically significant contribution.

*Although all results are statistically significant in Pearson's Chi-square ($p < .001$), standardized residual was under |2| in the Dreamer and Self-oriented profiles, suggesting that there were no significant contributions to these categories (MacDonald & Gardner, 2000).

to self-orientation. Dreamers produced the longest responses with many expressions reflecting uncertainty. Disengaged respondents displayed the most uncertainty and facetiousness. They expressed no beyond-the-self dimension. Even though quantitative profiles and qualitative responses aligned to some extent, there was a discrepancy between the quantitative and qualitative results especially concerning the beyond-the-self dimension, which was not as prominent in written responses as on the quantitative scale.

Discussion

It is exceedingly important to study adolescents' purposes in the 2020s. The COVID-19 pandemic, the unstable global situation, the variety of life choices and identities (Karvonen et al., 2022), adolescents' mental health (UNICEF, 2022), and increasing discrepancies between genders in educational performance (Helakorpi & Kivimäki, 2021) have made adolescence relatively difficult. At the end of their basic education the students are in the throes of identity formation (Marttinen, 2017), youth purpose development (Damon, 2008), and influenced by cultural frameworks (Coté, 2014). They are making decisions on their education and future orientation. More choices cause greater difficulties to engage oneself; adolescents face anxiety, depression, and frustration and in the worst case they become tired of making decisions and adopt a criminal agenda or lose all sense of purpose (Eryilmaz, 2018; Huhta, 2022). Adolescents need a sense of purpose, of belonging, and chances to do something meaningful and prosocial for others (Martela & Steger, 2016). Understanding the present situation emphasizes the importance of pursuing personally meaningful and prosocial life purposes, which was the objective of the present study.

Although the survey took place right after the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period and at the end of our adolescents' basic education, it was evident in our study that the self-knowledge and sense of direction of the Finnish adolescents were relatively high. The main result of this study was that Finnish adolescents seem exceptionally aware of their life purposes and have in that sense achieved the holistic aims of the national curriculum. This seems an important and gratifying finding as regards positive youth purpose formation and the transition to upper secondary education and vocational school.

According to the quantitative data, 41% were placed in the Purposeful profile, indicating mature purpose: these young people had found a meaningful purpose and were pursuing it, contributing beyond the self. The second largest group, Self-oriented (35%) had also found meaningful goals and were pursuing them, but their orientation was toward themselves rather than beyond the self. Dreamers (18%) hoped to contribute to society, but their sense of purpose was low. The smallest group was Disengaged (6%), with no purpose, no engagement, and no beyond-the-self

orientation. Lack of purpose or lack of commitment to a purpose could explain not knowing what to pursue or what was not considered important. If adolescents stay disengaged, they are at risk of societal exclusion and wrongdoing (Damon, 2008). Future studies should determine whether the disengaged are committed to something which they are perhaps unable to articulate or recognize.

Boys were in the majority the in Self-oriented and Disengaged profiles. A similar gender difference has been reported in American studies (Sumner et al., 2018). This may be due to the survey method, school context, or to girls being more acutely aware of societal issues and prosocial values (Schulz et al., 2018). These findings align with the gender gap in school attitudes and performances (Helakorpi & Kivimäki, 2021; Pöysä et al., 2018). It may reflect adolescents' sense of having control over their lives and aiming higher in their aspirations or gender related differences, in how they spend their leisure time or how parents and teachers interact differently with boys and girls (OECD, 2019b). We suspect that this could explain why the disengaged, mainly boys, challenge the education system and call for mindful gender sensitivity in schools. All genders would benefit from a school community which supports the socialization process along with experiences of fellowship, equity, and equality (Bundick & Tirri, 2014).

The qualitative data and content analysis showed that *two thirds* of the respondents described and reasoned their purpose in life and were pursuing it. However, self-orientation dominated the written responses. Social desirability and the school environment may influence quantitative responses more and respondents may choose their ideals, while written responses may reveal the actual thought and action processes reflecting the structured nature of purpose development. The results differ from those of a Finnish study on adolescent life goals (Marttinen, 2017) where property, vocation or family were among the most important adolescent life purposes. Our results suggest that purposes related to state of mind predominated in our sample. This was visible in adolescents' quest for purposes like happiness and sense of accomplishment. An uncertain present and future may emphasize values and psychological well-being in life purposes.

Our qualitative results concur with those of the Finnish Youth Barometer 2020 regarding adolescents' thinking; everyone is responsible for themself and their own well-being (Berg & Myllyniemi, 2021). The result reflected the individualistic self-improvement and self-management ethos of Western societies (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016; Schulz et al., 2018). It is possible that by having a job and through self-actualization some adolescents think that they add value to society even if they cannot put this into words. At the same time, *one third* identified no purpose in life. This result could be explained through the School Health Promotion Study (Helakorpi & Kivimäki, 2021), where one third of girls and eight percent of boys reported moderate to severe anxiety. Furthermore, the sense of loneliness has risen among both and satisfaction with life diminished from 2019 to 2021 (Helakorpi & Kivimäki, 2021). Among our no-purpose responses were also several mentions of death by students of every gender and purpose profile, mostly among those in the Dreamer profile ($n = 10$) and least in the Purposeful profile ($n = 5$). Such responses could refer to underlying psychopathological problems, young people's antisocial purposes or knowledge of the biological facts of the human lifespan (Damon, 2008). Those who lack purpose or have an antisocial purpose may be in danger of radicalization or criminality (Eryilmaz, 2018; Sumner et al., 2018). On the other hand, not knowing one's future plans and having an identity crisis could be part of the normal adolescent development and socialization process (Erikson, 1968; Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 2017).

Triangulation of both datasets revealed that characteristic features of the purpose profiles were identifiable in the written responses (Bronk et al., 2018; Magen, 1998) even though the beyond-the-self dimension was not equally visible in the students' own texts. Boys and girls differed in their placements in the purpose profiles: Girls dominated in the Purposeful and Dreamer profiles, thus the beyond-the-self orientation was typical for girls. According to our findings, young people belonging to the Purposeful profile seemed to have acquired the citizenship skills required by the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education and also by a democratic society; participation, involvement, and building a sustainable future (Finnish National Board of Education,

2016). Most of the adolescents seemed to have the courage to pursue their purpose in life. However, beyond-the-self orientation was rare in their written responses. Contributing to the common good is an essential behavior and mentality for active citizenship and in that sense, adolescents fall short on these educational aims as they were not able express their potential interest in contributing to others. We can speculate that either the adolescents did not know how to describe such thinking, or their societal knowledge and interests had not transformed into the ability and skills to articulate them (Schulz et al., 2018).

On a societal level there are many programs to support Finnish adolescents in achieving a sustainable and prosocial life (Ministerial Working Group on Child and Youth Policy, 2020; Ministry of the Interior, 2020). Both institutional and individual encounters are needed. Acquiring and intensifying life purposes at school or through other professionals (counselors and psychologists) could help adolescents to find new directions and avoid social exclusion. Motivation and self-awareness are cultivated along with purpose in life. On the other hand, education could achieve its democratic objectives by establishing communality, strengthening students' sense of capability, and seeing their unique meaning and importance and position in the school environment (Tirri & Kuusisto, 2022). The school atmosphere, decision-making, teaching, counseling, and involvement represent society to the students. Seeing other students doing good for them, participating themselves, and being of service themselves adds well-being and happiness as byproducts (Helliwell et al., 2022; Malin, 2022). These emotions and experiences have a profound impact on students' willingness to participate in their municipality, their society, and to maintain Finland as the happiest country in the world for years to come (Helliwell et al., 2022).

Limitations and future studies

Our survey was conducted in spring 2020 just after the first COVID-19 lockdown. It was also the end of the respondents' basic education and the last school week before the summer break. These circumstances may have had an impact on motivation to respond and on the nature of the responses. The questionnaire may have been too long for them, causing mostly short responses to open-ended questions. However, earlier studies among Finnish and Dutch university students have shown that such brief responses are typical (Kuusisto & Schutte, 2022; Kuusisto & Tirri, 2021). The motivational YouTube video and youth-initiated design of the Qualtrics survey were intended to encourage motivation.

Operationalization and measurement of purpose in life still needs further development (Hatchimonji et al., 2019). The absence of beyond-the-self-expressions in the written responses may indicate that either the adolescents are not used to expressing beyond-the-self-interests or that this plays no part in their life purpose. There was a particular discrepancy between the quantitative and qualitative results concerning the beyond-the-self dimension, and this was discernible in the quantitative survey results. Our findings suggest that the first and second dimensions of purpose definition, intention, and engagement, aligned well in both methods. In general, there were so few mentions of beyond-the-self orientation in reasoning in the written responses that it was impossible to fully construct purpose profiles based on the qualitative data. In an American study (Baumsteiger et al., 2022) one of the methods was to let participants spend a few minutes imagining their lives in the future and what they hoped to accomplish. Then they were asked "What kind of mark do you hope to leave on the world?" Such a question could be included in qualitative data gathering in the future to test whether it reveals the beyond-the-self dimension of the purpose in responses.

Adolescents' mental health contrasts with the exceptionally high sense of purpose among Finnish students. In earlier studies having a purpose has been an important part of well-being (Bronk et al., 2018; Damon et al., 2003; Ryff, 1989). In future studies would be important to ascertain if purposeful young people experience mental health challenges or whether life purpose is a protective factor against such challenges, giving the resilience needed. Are mental health issues more acute among those with premature purpose or those lacking purpose? These results could

shed light on this pervasive concern. For future studies it is vital to interview adolescents qualitatively about their purpose trajectories and hear what kind of support has benefited them in their purpose development. It will be interesting to see if a follow-up study reveals whether premature purposes have developed into mature purposes on all three dimensions or if life purposes have changed or faded on some purpose dimensions. For further studies, we suggest researching whether economic background, parents' educational level, encounters with teachers and/or other school personnel or activities have an impact on purpose development. It would also be interesting to ascertain whether municipal youth workers or those among religious denominations play a relevant part in purpose development among adolescents.

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ORCID

Merja Viljanen http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3683-3103
Elina Kuusisto http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5003-547X

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