

Purposeful teachers and teaching in Finland and Estonia

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The purpose of this study was to investigate how Finnish and Estonian teachers perceive their purpose in life ($n_{\text{FIN}}=238$, $n_{\text{EST}}=376$) and purposeful teaching ($n_{\text{FIN}}=11$, $n_{\text{EST}}=8$). A mixed-method convergent design and sequential explanatory design were utilised. Quantitative data ($n_{\text{FIN}}=238$, $n_{\text{EST}}=376$) was first gathered and analysed; then, on the basis of this analysis, qualitative interviews were conducted to explore the quantitative findings in greater depth ($n_{\text{FIN}}=11$, $n_{\text{EST}}=8$). The quantitative data revealed three different purpose profiles (*fully purposeful*, *moderately purposeful*, and *potentially purposeful*), of which *fully purposeful* teachers represented over half of all teachers (56.5%). According to the *fully purposeful* teachers we interviewed, purposeful teaching was realised through *professionally competent* and *ethically competent teaching*. These *fully purposeful* teachers represent an ideal picture of purposeful teachers' thinking and practices. Finnish teachers emphasised communication skills as a part of *ethically competent teaching* more than did their Estonian counterparts. The results of this study indicate the need for future research on purposeful teaching in real teaching situations to capture the realities of purposeful teachers and teaching.

Keywords: teacher, purpose, purposeful teaching, Finland, Estonia

Introduction

This study explores how Finnish and Estonian teachers perceive their purpose in life and purposeful teaching. Teaching is an ethical profession (Campbell, 2003; Hansen, 1995; Tirri, 1999), and the new demands of the 21st century call for teachers who are able to find a personal and societal purpose in teaching and who can commit to the teaching profession in the long term (Tirri, 2018; Tirri & Kuusisto, 2022). According to Tirri and Kuusisto (2022), the most vital factor in the teaching profession is teachers' commitment to students and the

support of their learning and personal development. Furthermore, teachers are expected to engage in continual lifelong development and exploration, which are also seen as indicators of professionalism (Korthagen, 2017; Tsui, 2009). The current literature on the teaching profession utilises a concept of purposeful teaching that combines professional and ethical competences (See, e.g., Tirri, 2022). Professional competencies, such as skills for promoting learning in a variety of contexts, the capacity to motivate students to learn, and efficacy beliefs about learning are important aspects of teachers' professionalism (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Toom et al., 2021). Previous research on purposeful teachers and teaching has demonstrated that such teachers view themselves as holistic educators who are responsible for students' personal and ethical growth (Tirri et al., 2019). In addition, a previous study by Tirri and Ubani (2013) showed that purposeful teachers emphasised some general aspects of teaching, such as content knowledge of their own subject. However, while the importance of purposeful teaching has been acknowledged, scholars have found that teachers struggle to combine personal life purposes and professional commitments in their work (Korthagen, 2017; Kuusisto & Tirri, 2021). Furthermore, the current problems in the field of education, such as growing inequality, learning challenges, and cultural differences, require teachers with pedagogical and ethical competences (Tirri, 2018). Furthermore, global crises call for teachers who have internalised the values of social justice, empowerment, and transformation in moral education (Veugelers, 2017).

According to Tirri (2018, p. 222), purposeful teachers are 'ethical professionals with a long-term commitment to their students and educational goals they intend to meet in their teaching'. Furthermore, their teaching should be beneficial to their colleagues and society at large (Tirri et al., 2019). This definition is based on Damon et al.'s (2003) operationalisation of purpose in life as 'a stable and generalised intention to accomplish something that is at once

meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self' (p. 121). Both Damon et al.'s (2003) definition of purpose and Tirri's (2019) concept of a purposeful teacher include three dimensions: (1) *personal meaningfulness*, (2) *goal-directedness*, and (3) *contribution beyond-the-self*. These dimensions can be utilised to identify the stage of development and the level of maturity of one's purpose. Thus, within this framework, purposeful refers to a person who exhibits all three dimensions, indicating they have found a meaningful, long-term purpose that benefits not only themselves but others (Damon, 2008). According to Tirri (2018), purposeful teachers possess clear educational visions which are actualised in their teaching by creating conditions for learning that help students find personal meaning from the contents and subjects taught. Furthermore, purposeful teachers aim to help their students find a sustainable and long-term purpose in their studies. However, as Damon (2008) notes, teachers' own understanding of their purpose is the foundation for teaching purpose to their students. Nevertheless, teachers can be purposeful without teaching being their life purpose (Tirri, 2018).

The concepts of purposeful teaching (Kuusisto & Tirri, 2021; Tirri et al., 2019) and the happiness of teaching (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2009) share the idea that teachers are ethical professionals who enhance students' well-being and eventually their excellence in learning. Bullough and Pinnegar (2009) claim that the core of the teaching profession is connected to the virtue of eudaimonia, a kind of happiness. In turn, Bellah et al. (1985, p. 66) state that teachers for whom teaching is an inner calling are simultaneously moral professionals and educators whose work constitutes the practical ideal of activity. Such teachers aim to help students reach their highest potential by utilizing specific virtues, such as patience, justice, and love. These underpin teacher ideals, ground exceptional practice, and hold the promise of happiness (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2009).

Both Finland and Estonia can be considered exemplar countries in education (OECD, 2018a, 2018b). It has been noted that one of the reasons for the success of an education system is high-quality teacher education (OECD, 2019; Poom-Valickis & Eisenschmidt, 2023; Tirri, 2014). In Finland and Estonia, teachers have completed university master's level education, which aims to educate pedagogically thinking, academic and autonomous professionals (Kansanen et al., 2000; Krull & Trasberg, 2006) who build their practice on research-based knowledge and ethical values (Jakku-Sihvonen & Niemi, 2006). Both countries' national core curricula emphasise students' holistic development (Estonian Government, 2011; Finnish National Board of Education, 2016), in which teachers are expected to promote social, emotional, and moral domains in school pedagogy (Tirri, 2011; Tuul et al., 2011). As Tirri and Kuusisto (2023b) note, academic achievement is not the only aim of schooling; rather, it should be complemented by life-long learning to promote wisdom and a moral lifestyle.

Although the Finnish and Estonian educational systems share many similarities, there are some differences which should be acknowledged. First, Finland and Estonia possess different histories, which have influenced their educational systems and practices (See e.g., Krull & Trasberg, 2006; Sahlberg, 2011). In addition, important differences exist between these two countries in teachers' societal status: in Finland, the teaching profession has always enjoyed public respect and appreciation (Simola, 2005), whereas Estonia's liberal-market-based society has challenged the professional identity of teachers, which, in addition to low salaries, has led to a reduction in the attractiveness of the teaching profession (Ruus et al., 2008).

Besides professional competence, teachers also require ethical competence in pedagogical encounters (Narvaez & Endicott, 2009; Ronkainen et al., 2021). School teachers

are challenged to create inclusive learning environments and secure spaces for encountering variety in values, cultures, and religions, and as well as in talents and (dis)abilities (Tirri & Kuusisto, 2023a). In Finland and Estonia, teachers' ethical codes provide a value base and guidance for growth in teachers' professionalism. These ethical codes, which emphasise dignity, truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, and freedom, were established in Finland in 1998 and in Estonia in 2005 (Estonian Teachers Union, 2005; Trade Union of Education in Finland, 2010). In addition, teachers' worldviews and life purposes are important aspects of teachers' ethical competence (Moran, 2019). In order to manifest this ethical competence, teachers require ethical sensitivity, which means that teachers are able to identify and solve moral dilemmas in teaching in a constructive manner. Previous studies have demonstrated that caring by connecting to others is the core dimension of ethical sensitivity among Finnish and Estonian teachers. Other important aspects of ethical sensitivity include taking the perspective of others, reading ethical issues and identifying the consequences of various actions and options (Gholami et al., 2015; Ronkainen et al., 2021). However, previous studies have found that teachers lack skills in this domain (Jackson et al., 1993; Tirri, 2019). Nevertheless, although previous research has investigated teachers' professional and ethical competencies (e.g., Kansanen et al., 2000; Korthagen, 2017), few studies have examined these elements from the perspective of purposeful teaching. Tirri and colleagues (See, e.g., Kuusisto & Tirri, 2021; Kuusisto et al., 2016; Tirri, 2018; Tirri & Kuusisto, 2022) have researched purposeful teachers and teaching in the Finnish context. In addition, a small number of studies in the Estonian context (See, e.g., Leijen et al., 2020; Priestley et al., 2015) have researched issues similar to purpose, such as teacher agency. Nevertheless, research specifically addressing purposeful teachers and teaching in the Estonian context is lacking. Consequently, our study explores this by aiming to provide a more in-depth exploration of the

characteristics of purposeful teachers and teaching in Finland and Estonia. To achieve this aim, we attempt to answer the following research question and two sub-research questions:

1. How do Finnish and Estonian teachers perceive their purpose in life and purposeful teaching?

1.1 What kind of purpose-in-life profiles can be found among Finnish and Estonian teachers?

1.2 How is purposeful teaching manifested among fully purposeful teachers in Finland and Estonia?

Materials and methods

Participants

The study participants were Finnish and Estonian teachers ($N=614$, $n_{\text{FIN}}=238$, $n_{\text{EST}}=376$), of whom 19 were interviewed ($n_{\text{FIN}}=11$, $n_{\text{EST}}=8$). Table 1 presents their background characteristics.

Table 1. Finnish and Estonian teachers' background information

	Finland n=238	Estonia n=376	Total n=614
Age	M=45 (SD=16.9) Min 25, Max 71	M=47 (SD=18.2) Min 21, Max 79	M=46 (SD=17.8) Min 21, Max 79
Teaching experience	M=16 (SD=12.5) Min 1, Max 40	M=20 (SD=15.2) Min 0, Max 56	M=18 (SD=14.4) Min 0, Max 56
Gender	Female 178 (75 %) Male 59 (25 %)	Female 338 (90 %) Male 37 (10 %)	Female 516 (84 %) Male 96 (16 %) Other 2 (0.3%)
Educational background			
Class teacher	86 (36 %)	64 (17 %)	150 (25 %)
Subject teacher	90 (38 %)	238 (63 %)	328 (53 %)
Special education teacher	62 (26 %)	74 (20 %)	136 (22 %)

Procedure

This study utilises convergent design and sequential explanatory design (Creswell, 2015) to investigate purposeful teachers and teaching. First, all participating teachers answered a survey that included quantitative instruments and open-ended questions. Second, teachers who were identified as *fully purposeful* in our Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) and who had written explicitly in the survey that teaching was their life purpose were interviewed in their native language during spring 2021. Each interview lasted between 10 and 35 minutes and was conducted via a videoconferencing application. The interviews were transcribed and include a total of 104 pages of text (74 pages of Finnish data and 45 pages of Estonian data).

In Finland, ethical consent was obtained from municipalities, principals, and teachers, while, in Estonia, principals and teachers provided their ethical consent. At the beginning of the study, Finnish and Estonian principals were contacted by email to enquire about their interest in participating in the research. The principals then forwarded the survey to their teachers. In both countries, teacher participation was voluntary. The teachers replied to an online questionnaire created with Qualtrics-software.

Instruments

Quantitative instruments

In this study, purpose in life is understood as a three-dimensional construct, in line with Damon et al.'s (2003) definition. These dimensions were operationalised with the following instruments in a survey to identify teachers' purpose profiles. First, five items from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006) measured *personal meaningfulness* (FOUND) with items rated on a scale of 1–7 (1=totally disagree, 7=totally agree), for example, 'I understand the meaning of life'. Second, nine items from the Purpose in Life scale – part of

Ryff's (1989, Ryff & Keyes, 1995) Scales of Psychological Well-being – measured *goal-directedness* (RYFF) with items rated on a scale of 1–7 (1=totally disagree, 7=totally agree), for example, 'I live my life day by day, and I don't really think about the future'. Finally, four items from the Claremont Purpose Scale (Bronk et al., 2018) were utilised to measure the *beyond-the-self-dimension* (BTS) with items rated on a scale of 1–5 (1=totally disagree/almost never, 5=totally agree/almost all the time), for example, 'How often do you hope to leave the world in better shape than it was when you came here?' Alpha values for the three scales indicated a good reliability: FOUND $\alpha_{Fin} = .902$, $\alpha_{Est} = .872$, RYFF $\alpha_{Fin} = .765$, $\alpha_{Est} = .754$, BTS $\alpha_{Fin} = .799$, $\alpha_{Est} = .96$.

Qualitative instruments

Two qualitative methods were used to investigate purposeful teaching: first, teachers' written descriptions of their purpose in life and its relation to teaching in the survey and, second, interviews with the *fully purposeful* teachers identified with the quantitative instruments described in the previous section. In the survey, all teachers answered the following open-ended questions: 1) What is your purpose in life? 2) How is teaching related to your purpose in life?

In this study, teacher interviews were used to describe, enhance, and deepen understanding of the way teachers' purpose in life is related to their teaching. The teacher interviews were structured around the following questions: 1. 'Describe an example of a personally purposeful teaching experience in which you have been able to actualize your purpose in life in your teaching'; 2. 'Describe the situations in which your purpose in life has helped you cope in your work as a teacher'; 3. 'What aspects of your work have prevented you from actualising your purpose in life?' The teacher interviews aimed to answer sub-research question 1.2: 'How is purposeful teaching manifested among fully purposeful teachers in Finland and Estonia?'

Analysis

Analyses of teachers' purpose profiles

Multigroup latent profile analysis (LPA) was performed in Mplus version 8.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017). First, the ideal number of profiles was separately identified for the Finnish and Estonian teachers (Table 2). LPAs were computed with all variances as equal, and the variables FOUND and RYFF were allowed to correlate with each other (WITH statement). The final model was chosen based on a mix of statistical indicators, as follows: The lowest levels of Log-likelihood and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) were considered to imply the best model (Nylund et al., 2007). In entropy, which ideally should be near 1, values above 0.6 were seen as sufficient. In the Vuong-Lo-Mendell-Rubin Likelihood Ratio Test (VLMR) and Parametric Bootstrapped Likelihood Ratio Test (BLRT), a significant result indicated that the tested model was more suitable than a model with fewer profiles. Based on these indicators, two profiles of Finnish teachers and three profiles of Estonian teachers proved to be the best option.

Table 2. Statistical indicators for Finnish and Estonian LPA models

# of profiles	Finnish models					Estonian models				
	Log-likelihood (dF)	VLMR (p)	BLRT (p)	BIC	Entropy	Log-likelihood (dF)	VLMR (p)	BLRT (p)	BIC	Entropy
2	-945.820 (11)	0.0142	0.0000	1951.835	0.864	-1514.352 (11)	0.5723	0.0000	3093.930	0.757
3	-937.154 (15)	0.0213	0.0000	1956.392	0.913	-1495.993 (15)	0.0486	0.0000	3080.930	0.814
4	-927.367 (19)	0.3641	0.0000	1958.707	0.836	-1487.169	0.7637	0.0000	3087.001	0.773
5	-918.230 (23)	0.4659	0.0128	1962.322	0.807	-1477.057 (23)	0.1437	0.0128	3090.494	0.796

Second, a three-profile model was chosen, since it better captured the different profiles identified in the separate LPAs. The LPA continued by utilising both datasets together, comparing an unconstrained model with a fully constrained model to identify the level of

similarities and differences between the Finnish and Estonian teachers' profiles. In the unconstrained model, all differences were allowed to occur freely; thus, profile membership assignment was allowed to vary across the samples. By contrast, in the fully constrained model, the largest differences between the countries were constrained to be equal. The unconstrained and fully constrained models with three profiles were compared using the Satorra-Bentler Chi-square Difference Test (Satorra & Bentler, 2000), which showed that the fully constrained model was more appropriate than the unconstrained model $\Delta\chi^2(9) = 6.1528$, $p > .05$.

Analysis of interviews

Teachers whose purpose profile was identified as *fully purposeful* in the LPA and who had described teaching as their purpose in life in their written descriptions were chosen to be interviewed ($n_{\text{FIN}} = 11$, $n_{\text{EST}} = 8$). For example, one Finnish special education teacher was chosen because her life purpose was the following: "To live my life as wisely as possible in a way that benefits not only myself but also other people. In addition, in keeping with my worldview, I also serve a higher power, God, and seek His will in my own life". Moreover, she related teaching to her life purpose thus: "The teaching profession is a good place to serve your fellow human beings and society. I get to feel useful every day, even though my daily life is often hectic". In turn, one Estonian teacher defined her purpose in life as to "pass on knowledge and opportunities to young people, to open as many doors as possible and to make them aware of the different options available to them". Furthermore, she explained that her purpose in life related to her teaching as follows: "As a teacher, I can pass on all my experience and knowledge, to motivate the next generation to do the same, to discover the world and the purpose of life for themselves."

The interviews were transcribed and anonymised for each teacher. Inductive content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) was then utilised to answer the research questions. The unit of analysis was a statement reflecting the manifestation of purposeful teaching; these statements varied from one sentence to entire paragraphs. Teachers' experiences and understanding of purposeful teaching varied considerably, which provided us with diverse data on the manifestation of purposeful teaching. The first author identified the units of analysis in the Finnish data and the third author in the Estonian data. Eight main categories with subcategories were initially created to describe the manifestation of purposeful teaching. The first round of categories was then revised by the second and the last author, after which two main categories with seven subcategories were coded. The final category names and placement of units were negotiated within the whole research team.

Results

Purpose profiles

Figure 1 illustrates the three purpose profiles, which were similar in both countries. Over half the teachers were identified as *fully purposeful* ($N = 347$, 56.5%; $n_{Fin} = 137$, 58%; $n_{Est} = 210$, 56%). These teachers scored high on all three dimensions of purpose, indicating that they had found a meaningful purpose that was goal-directed and aimed at making the world a better place. The second largest profile was named *moderately purposeful* ($N = 233$, 38%; $n_{Fin} = 85$, 36%; $n_{Est} = 148$, 39%), in which teachers scored relatively high on all dimensions.

Nevertheless, they were less convinced than *fully purposeful* teachers that they had found and committed themselves to long-term goals to achieve their purpose. The third profile was named *potentially purposeful* ($N = 34$, 5.5%; $n_{Fin} = 16$, 7%; $n_{Est} = 18$, 5%). *Potentially purposeful* teachers scored high in their beyond-the-self aspirations but had not yet found a meaningful purpose; moreover, they displayed little or no goal-directedness. In one-way analyses of

variances,¹ Games-Howell pairwise comparisons showed that all profiles differed statistically significantly in FOUND, RYFF and BTS ($p < .05$) except for Finnish and Estonian teachers within the same profile and for Finnish *potentially purposeful* and Estonian *moderately purposeful teachers* in BTS.

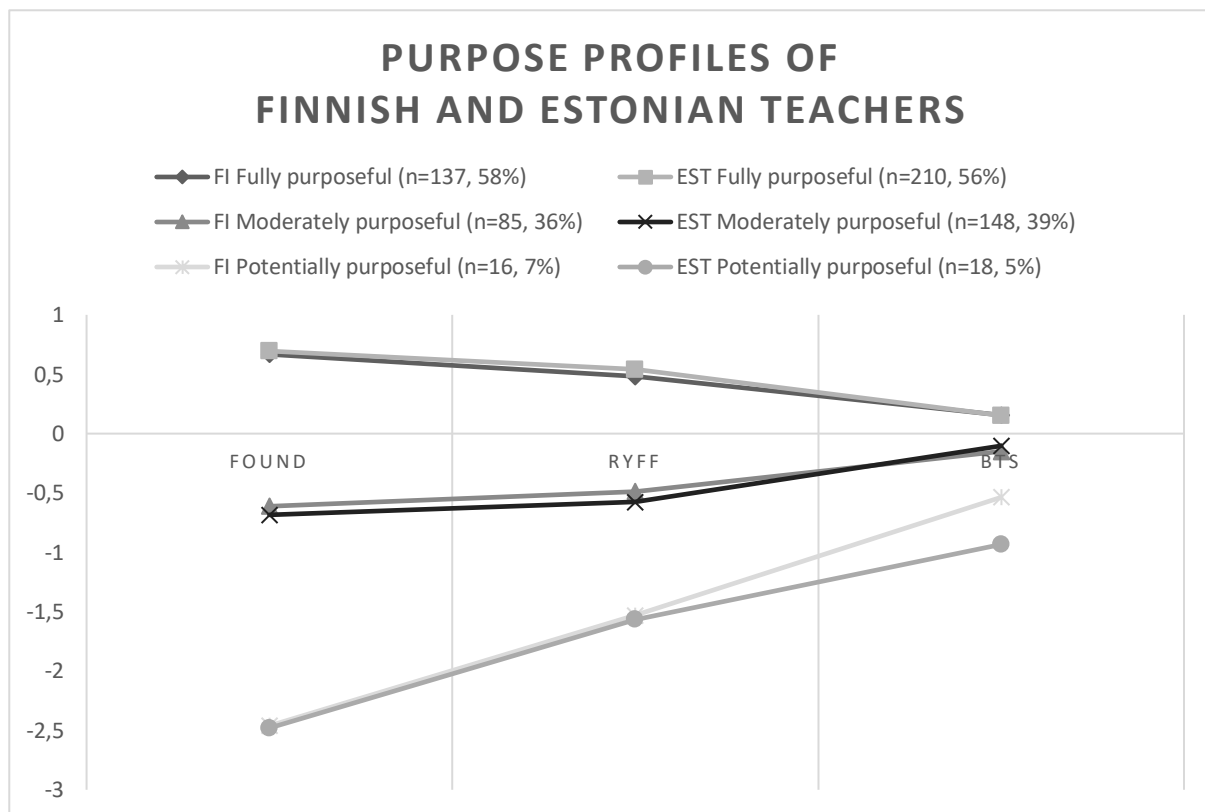


Figure 1 Finnish and Estonian teachers' purpose profiles (FOUND = presence of purpose, RYFF = goal-directedness, BTS = beyond-the-self)

Manifesting purposeful teaching among fully purposeful Finnish and Estonian teachers

Table 3 shows how purposeful teaching is manifested according to the fully purposeful teachers we interviewed. The teachers' descriptions in the interviews were categorised into two main categories: *professionally competent teaching* and *ethically competent teaching*.

¹FOUND Finland $F(2)=471.569$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .801$; Estonia $F(2)=561.058$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .751$; RYFF Finland $F(2)=71.170.901$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .377$, Estonia $F(2)=130.586$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .412$; BTS Finland $F(2)=5.082$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$; Estonia $F(2)=11.711$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$

Table 3. Manifestation of purposeful teaching

Purposeful teaching is manifested in	Finnish teachers n=11	Estonian teachers n=8	In total
	f	f	
Professionally competent teaching	76	49	125
Pedagogical competence	38	22	60
Holistic teaching	27	16	43
Professional development	11	11	22
Ethically competent teaching	55	34	89
Ethical sensitivity in the school community	23	10	33
Personal commitment to ethical values	9	13	22
Ability to solve difficult situations	10	7	17
Skills to communicate with the members of school community	13	4	17

Professionally competent teaching

The first main category for purposeful teaching was *professionally competent teaching*. The goal of the teaching profession is to help students grow and learn. For both the Finnish and Estonian teachers, *pedagogical competence* concerned building their teaching on the strengths of their students, as the following example from Olli, a Finnish primary school special education teacher shows:

The essential role of teaching is to look for students' strengths. I can take part in student's development and see how a student 'starts to fly', that is my reward from the work.

The teachers in our study wished to observe their students' learning closely and emphasised the importance of persistence in learning. For example, Kati, an Estonian language teacher, remarked, 'I like to be inside the process where I see that the student is growing in some way', while Sanni, a Finnish class teacher stated that 'we are practising new skills; you don't have to be perfect; that is why we do it together'.

Pedagogical competence was also shown in the use of creative teaching methods. For example, Maija, a Finnish primary school special education teacher, used origami activities, explaining the benefits of using this method as follows: 'It combines a tremendous amount of old knowledge with understanding and learning about perception. If a student has difficulty with maths, then there are also often challenges in visual perception'. The teacher was thus able to utilise origami and apply her pedagogical competence to support students with learning difficulties.

Learning from peers was another way of utilising creative teaching methods for students' learning, which was explained by another teacher: 'It's purposeful because students can teach each other, and they will accept that everyone is not at the same level. Also, the notion that a child might be able to explain something better than a teacher is good' (Jukka, Finnish class teacher).

The goal of *holistic teaching* is to educate the whole personality of the student. Purposeful teaching guides students to reflect on the importance of a subject for their own lives and future studies. Ellie, an Estonian history teacher, highlighted students' own role in their learning, in which the teacher can gradually become invisible:

When you sit in the class and you're bored and the students are working, this is the best outcome. The purpose is to teach students how to manage on their own and to teach them to take an interest in the world. And when they no longer need you, that is best.

In addition, Anna, a Finnish class teacher, agreed by emphasising holistic teaching with the statement 'schooling is important for life'.

The last subcategory of professionally competent teaching was *professional development*, which requires teachers to engage in life-long learning. The fully purposeful teachers we interviewed explained how free time and professional development go hand in hand, as in the following statement from Maija, a Finnish special education teacher: ‘All knowledge you obtain in free time you can use here in work as a special education teacher. This inspires me to look for more knowledge’. This sentiment was also echoed by Danny, a Finnish secondary school history teacher:

I feel like the kind of time I have spent on something extra even outside of school, I can have so much more for my own teaching. All that [development and co-operation] enriches my teaching, which, after all, goes to the benefit of students, which is the most important.

In addition, on the topic of professional development, Reet, an Estonian physics teacher, remarked, ‘I have always the aim of understanding the essence, how some methods are useful, and then I can teach for students’.

These examples demonstrate the intrinsic connection between professional development and teaching and the way personal purposes in life can be combined with professional interests. These results are in line with the findings of previous studies that life-long learning is an indicator of professionalism (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Korthagen, 2017; Tsui, 2009).

Ethically competent teaching

Ethically competent teaching was manifested in a similar way among both Finnish and Estonian teachers through *ethical sensitivity in the school community*. Teachers highlighted the role of persistence in caring for their students and their families. For example, Tiina, a Finnish class teacher, exhibited her holistic caring approach through her frequent phone calls to

prevent students from dropping out of school: 'I will not give up with this student, and I will do whatever it takes to get her back to school. I called her home every day and woke her up'. In turn, one of the Estonian teachers emphasised the kind of supportive school environment that makes teaching possible: 'I do my best to support their well-being and school joy' (Inge, Estonian art teacher). These examples demonstrate the core aspect of ethical sensitivity in teaching, which is caring by connecting to others (Ronkainen et al., 2021).

The teachers we interviewed also emphasised *personal commitment to ethical values*. Almost half the Finnish teachers explained their thinking and actions through values with religious underpinnings, such as serving others, finding a meaning and place in life, and loving others. Teachers who identified themselves as Christians understood purposeful teaching strongly through Christian values, and Christianity also directed their behaviour. For instance, the idea adapted of the Golden Rule, 'Love your neighbour as yourself', was mentioned as the fundamental value behind teaching. In addition, belief in God provided grounds for good teaching: 'I believe that God's plan for each human is good, and everyone is valuable, good, and able to learn and cope' (Finnish class teacher Sara). In these examples, Christianity provided a value base for teachers, which is in line with Moran's (2019) conclusions that worldviews can offer a strong basis for life purpose and meaning making. The Estonian teachers, in turn, were mostly committed to humanistic values, for example, focusing on ethical principles in everyday life. Respect, fairness, and willingness to help others were the main values among Estonian teachers. Meeli, an Estonian class teacher, reflected on her value base in the following way: 'Treating other people with respect is truly important to me'. Thus, regardless of their worldview, teachers in both countries shared similar kinds of values, such as human dignity, which are also highlighted in the Finnish and Estonian ethical teaching codes.

Teachers can encounter dramatic events in their work, which calls for the *ability to solve difficult situations*. In these incidents, purposeful teachers make a special effort to meet the needs of the student. In our data, this was exemplified by Rita, an Estonian language teacher, who manifested purposeful teaching by supporting a student experiencing panic attacks and self-harming thoughts.

If you've had a problematic student for three years, and we're speaking here about someone who is depressed and wants to kill themselves. And then at their high school graduation they come up to you, hug you and say, 'thank you! Thanks to you I'm alive'. A teacher needs to see that you are not just a teacher for teaching; you are a role model, a supporter, . . . a psychologist, mother, father, whoever that student needs now. And so, you'll sit in that toilet when the student is having a panic attack and hold them tight. . . . But maybe you're the only person they have at that moment.

Rita's story is a good example of a fully purposeful teacher with long-term goals and commitment to solving difficult situations with their students.

Ethically competent teaching also appeared in both Finnish and Estonian teachers' *skills to communicate with the members of the school community*. They desired to create a safe atmosphere and trust for discussions with the students in classrooms and during breaks and with the entire school community, including colleagues and parents, which can be seen as one of the core qualities of teachers (Korthagen, 2017). Moreover, students had provided positive feedback on this kind of communication, as the following example from Kersti, an Estonian language teacher, indicates: "They [students] said, "it's so nice to talk to you. It is always nice to be in this classroom and in your class". Creation of a classroom atmosphere where good

relational processes help students feel a sense of socioemotional support (warmth, safety) is a key teaching competence (Wang et al., 2020).

Using the data from the teacher interviews, we created a model of the ideal characteristics of a *fully purposeful* teacher's thinking and practices (See Table 4.). Table 4 presents how *professionally* and *ethically competent* teaching is perceived according to the interviews with *fully purposeful* teachers. *Professionally competent* teaching highlighted the importance of learning and growth for students and teachers, whereas *ethically competent* teaching emphasised aspects of security.

Table 4. Ideal characteristics of fully purposeful teachers' thinking and practices

	Professionally competent teaching		Ethically competent teaching
Pedagogically competent teachers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> aim to enhance students' learning and growth are optimistic, supportive, perceptive help students find their strengths, learn from mistakes and be persistent use various methods for enhancing learning, such as play, differentiation, grouping 	Ethically sensitive teachers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> build a good relationship with students treat students with love and acceptance listen to and encounter students, provide a secure atmosphere show persistence towards students
Holistic teaching aims to:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> provide equal opportunities for all: schooling is for life teach children good working- and teamwork skills, providing them with tools to express themselves and develop their worldviews Build students' self- confidence and identity Security and trust are the basis for holistic teaching 	Teachers' personal commitment to ethical values:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Christianity offers ethical guidelines which are expressed through virtues is seen as teaching according to one's own values worldview offers hope in challenging situations
Professional development is seen as:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> capacity for self-reflection willingness to develop one's professionalism, fearless attitude to challenges utilisation of knowledge and skills learned in free time for students' benefit maintenance and development of skills and the creation of networks 	Teachers' ability to solve difficult situations:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> is seen as the ability to tackle challenges in the short and long term emphasises teachers' communication and listening skills is based on a sense of security
		Teachers' skills to communicate with the members of the school community actualized through:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> an accepting, respectful, secure, and open atmosphere a culture of helping others

Concluding remarks

This mixed methods study used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to characterise purposeful teachers and teaching in Finland and Estonia. Based on multi-group latent profile analysis, three profiles were found. The majority (56.5%) of Finnish and Estonian teachers were *fully purposeful*, indicating that they had identified a purpose for themselves and that they were goal-directed and committed to contributing *beyond-the-self*. *Fully purposeful* teachers who had explicitly mentioned teaching as their purpose in life were invited for interview to study the manifestation of purposeful teaching in their work. These teachers manifested purposeful teaching through *professionally competent teaching* and *ethically competent teaching*. These *fully purposeful* teachers can be considered exemplar teachers who practised both academic and ethical aspects of their profession. According to a previous study by Tirri and Kuusisto (2016), purposeful teachers are able to educate holistically by taking into account the cognitive, social and moral dimensions of teaching and by providing their students with the skills and knowledge required for their future life, which is in line with the results of this study. Furthermore, according to Tirri's (2018) definition of purposeful teachers, teachers can be purposeful without feeling that teaching is necessarily their life purpose. However, this research focused only on the purposeful teaching of *fully purposeful* teachers.

Professionally competent teaching was the most common way to manifest purposeful teaching in both countries. The teachers in Finland and Estonia emphasised supporting students' strengths and teachers' active involvement in students' learning processes with creative teaching methods. Moreover, purposeful teachers had internalised the educational goals and philosophies of holistic teaching. The goal of education is to support the development of the whole person and provide tools for managing not only in school but also

in life in general (Estonian Government, 2011; Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). The teachers in our study were also devoted to life-long learning and able to utilise their personal interests to improve their teaching. This attitude motivated them to engage in teaching with a long-term commitment that benefited the whole school community. These findings are echoed in a previous study by Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2017), which also showed that effective professional development included collaboration both within and outside the school community and teachers' engagement in active learning.

Purposeful teaching was also manifested in *ethically competent teaching*. In an inclusive learning environment, ethical sensitivity is a necessary skill for teachers to cope with the diversities of school communities. Although Christianity was the leading worldview among the Finnish teachers in our study, while humanism was predominant among the Estonian teachers, the values derived from these different worldviews were similar in both countries, emphasising human dignity, respect, fairness, and love in teaching, thereby indicating that fully purposeful teachers had adopted teachers' ethical codes and their value base. The difference between Finnish and Estonian teachers' worldviews might be explained through differences in these countries' histories and education systems (Krull & Trasberg, 2006; Tirri, 2014; Tuul et al., 2011). Our interviews demonstrated that both Finnish and Estonian teachers regularly encounter difficult situations in which they require ethical competence and long-term commitment, for example concerning students with depression and mental health problems. Earlier research with principals confirms that moral values and ethical sensitivity are the basis for solving challenging incidents (Eisenschmidt et al., 2019). Purposeful teachers seem to demonstrate ethical sensitivity in the school culture, good communication with members of the school community, and the ability to solve difficult

situations. Moreover, today, teachers work in teams, where they also contribute to the professional learning of their colleagues (Simons & Ruijters, 2014).

Good communication skills are essential to building trusting relationships in the school community and a safe atmosphere for learning. Thus, teachers are required to be available for discussions and informal communication. Interestingly, the Finnish teachers in our study emphasised communication skills as part of ethically competent teaching much more than did their Estonian peers. This difference could be explained by the teaching strategies in these countries. In Finland, a student-centred approach is practised, where the teacher-student relationship is quite informal, and it is easier for students to approach their teachers (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). Although the individuality, support and independence of students have been promoted in Estonia in recent decades (Uibu & Kikas, 2014), many teachers might retain the teacher-centred beliefs characteristic of former Estonian society under Soviet rule. Another explanation could be the difference in the grade level taught by the participating teachers. The majority of the fully purposeful teachers we interviewed in Finland were class teachers (grades 1–6) or special education teachers, while in Estonia they were subject teachers (grades 7–9) teaching older students. Previous studies have shown that the ethical sensitivity skills of subject teachers, especially science teachers, are more fragile than those of class teachers and teachers of subjects like religious education, which represent more natural contexts to reflect on ethical issues with students (Tirri & Ubani, 2013; Kuusisto et al., 2012).

Our mixed-method explanatory sequential design allowed us to gain a more holistic picture of purposeful teachers and teaching. Our quantitative approach provided a view of Finnish and Estonian teachers' purposefulness at a general level. However, it should be noted that the quantitative instruments we used were not designed to study purposes in a

teaching context. Therefore, we utilised open-ended questions to allow teachers to describe, in their own words, how teaching was related to their life goals, thereby allowing us to identify more precisely those teachers for whom teaching constituted their life purpose. To deepen understanding of the manifestation of purposeful teaching, those fully purposeful teachers who had explicitly stated that teaching was their purpose in life were interviewed. Since this topic is extremely personal and sensitive, the interviews were conducted in the teachers' native language. In addition, using their native language in the interviews avoided linguistic misunderstandings and enabled the concepts of purposeful teaching to be opened up in the interview situations where necessary. The Finnish teachers were interviewed by the first author (class teacher and PhD student) and the Estonian teachers by the third author (professor). This might have influenced the interview process, as, for example, the length and style of the interviews varied between the two countries. Moreover, since two different researchers conducted the interviews, communication between them and the participants might also have differed. Nevertheless, the main findings were similar in both Finland and Estonia, indicating that our instruments were reliable and functioned in a similar way. Our multinational research team provided the opportunity to negotiate and interpret the findings from culturally relevant perspectives in both countries. Finland and Estonia are neighbouring countries that share similar historical and cultural features. However, Estonia was under Soviet rule from the end of the Second World War until the 1990s, which impacted Estonia's values, religious landscape, and educational system.

In addition, the team's broad methodological competence allowed us to use multiple methods of data collection and analysis. Nevertheless, all our datasets were based on teachers' self-reports; thus, in the future, purposeful teaching should be studied in real teaching situations to capture the reality of teachers' behaviour. The results of this study have important

implications for initial teacher education, practising teachers and teaching. Teachers require education on the competences that make purposeful teaching possible. They need to reflect on their own purposes in life and the connection between teaching and these personal aspirations, including both the professional and ethical competences related to teaching. Career-long guidance and support are required to help teachers find and develop a long-term commitment to teaching. Furthermore, to gain a better understanding of the teaching practices of purposeful teachers, more studies with classroom observation, interviews and stimulated recall interviews are required.

Initial teacher education plays an essential role in building teachers' professional and professional competences: as Tirri and Kuusisto (2022) note, initial teacher education could educate student teachers to acknowledge the ethical nature of teaching and put that knowledge into practice. This study provides tools and ideas for initial teacher education and practising teachers to understand better the importance of purposeful teaching. First, theoretical knowledge on purposeful teachers and teaching is important, and this study provides a theoretical background for purposeful teaching (See also Ronkainen, 2023). Second, the quantitative and qualitative instruments used in this research may be helpful tools for reflecting on one's own purpose. As Damon (2008) notes, teachers' own purpose is the foundation for teaching purpose to their students. Furthermore, Sanderse and Cooke (2021) and Moran (2016) highlight the importance of self-evaluation, which may gradually change a teacher's thinking towards more purposeful teaching. Therefore, it is important that purpose training already begins during initial teacher education, where student teachers can create a strong foundation for guiding their students to seek a purpose in their own lives.

A previous Finnish study by Kuusisto and Tirri (2021) demonstrated that teachers are rather self-oriented, and therefore teacher education in the 21st century should attempt to

nurture a more 'beyond-the-self' attitude. This kind of approach may help teachers build bridges between personal purposes and the teaching profession. Tirri and Kuusisto (2022) note that schools require teachers with a long-term commitment to teaching and a sense of the meaningfulness of their profession. It has even been suggested that becoming a purposeful teacher can be seen as the goal of teacher education for the 21st century (Tirri, 2018). This study researched teachers whose purpose in life was related to their purpose in teaching. The *fully purposeful* teachers who were interviewed can be seen as ideal purposeful teachers who perceive both the professional and ethical competences required of their profession. These elements of *fully purposeful* teachers introduced in Table 4 could be utilised in teacher education when framing the essential characteristics of teachers and teaching in a framework of ethics and excellence.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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