

Purpose in school is fostered when students and staff take responsibility for who and what they want to become, both in terms of professional careers and by being confident, responsible members of their community.

Why did you become a teacher? What gets you out of bed every day to engage with a classroom full of students? Too often, teachers will answer this question in a joking manner and say, “June, July, and August.”

This type of response is no laughing matter. It is critical that teachers have a strong sense of Purpose as professional educators and are able to clearly articulate that Purpose to others. Teachers are the greatest and most trusted spokespersons for education. Yet negative, complaint-ridden conversations too often dominate within the school and the community. What would happen if we changed the way we talk about our profession? What if we started talking about all of the amazing things that happen on a daily basis in our schools and classrooms, and let others know how they can help our continued efforts to improve by supporting promising practices and policies? What if we focused on the “bright spots” while we strive to achieve our Purpose?

William Damon (2008), an expert in the arena of Purpose, writes that many people are able to find a great sense of Purpose in their work. Individuals who are the most satisfied in their profession of choice and avoid burn-out frequently describe their work as a “calling.” Their job is something they feel a moral connection to, and they are committed to making a difference in the world through their work.

When someone thinks of work as a calling rather than merely as a job, the experience of working is transformed. The most routine accomplishments become sources of pride. Chores that once felt like drudgery become valued ways to make a difference in other people’s lives. Feelings of frustration diminish. (Damon, 2008, p. 42)

Damon’s research shows this to be true regardless of the stage of career. Additionally, the positive attitudes and behaviors of those who view work as a “calling” are contagious to others, inspiring them to seek a deeper meaning in their own work.

There are two Conditions that foster a meaningful sense of Purpose:
Leadership & Responsibility and Confidence to Take Action.



LEADERSHIP & RESPONSIBILITY



For teachers' sense of Purpose to be truly realized, they must have opportunities to demonstrate Leadership & Responsibility. This Condition is fostered when teachers are able to express their ideas, make decisions, and take responsibility for their choices. A significant number (80%) of teachers surveyed report that they see themselves as a leader. However, only 55% believe they have a voice in decision-making at school, and 62% believe building administration is willing to learn from the staff (QISVA, 2019). This indicates that opportunities exist to increase staff voice and provide more opportunities for teachers to exercise Leadership and Responsibility. This does not simply mean assigning new duties to staff members, but rather providing more meaningful opportunities for them to lead school-wide initiatives. Teachers' genuine involvement in school leadership increases their investment in and accountability for the school community.

CONFIDENCE TO TAKE ACTION



The final Condition, Confidence to Take Action really represents the “rubber meeting the road” and brings Purpose alive. Exercising teacher voice through sharing ideas and establishing shared goals is excellent, but educators must also be willing and ready to take action and make a difference! Teachers must believe in themselves and their ability to significantly contribute to the growth of the school community. 94% of teachers believe that they can make a difference in the world. Nearly all teachers (97%) believe they can be successful and report that they work hard to reach their goals. However, only 60% feel confident voicing their honest opinions and concerns, and 72% are excited about their future career in education (QISVA, 2019). All members of the school community must be involved in creating a culture of trust where every individual feels confident exercising his or her voice. And all members of the school community—far more than 72%!—should be excited about their future in education.

Without doubt, there are many in the education profession today who view teaching as a “calling.” They are passionate about impacting the lives of students in a meaningful way. By exercising their voice, those individuals can support others in their school that are struggling to find Purpose. It is important that teachers share their passion for teaching and their commitment to students—in and outside the walls of the school. Fostering a sense of Purpose will help teachers connect (or reconnect) with their “calling”, promote a positive culture, and strengthen the school community as a whole.

References:

- Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: How young people find their calling in life*. New York: Free Press.
- Quaglia Institute for School Voice & Aspirations. (2019). *Teacher Voice Report*. Retrieved from https://quagliainstitute.org/uploads/legacy/Teacher_Voice_Report.pdf