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Identifying the Purpose Fostering Factors in the Academic Lived Experience of Iranian Male Elites: A Qualitative Study

**Mohamad Reza Taghizadeh Shirazi¹ , Mansoureh Haj Hosseini^{2*} , Elaheh Hejazi Moughari³ ,
Keyvan Salehi⁴ **

1. Department of Educational Psychology & Counseling, Faculty of Psychology and Education, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran. Email: mohamadreza.taghi@ut.ac.ir
2. Corresponding Author, Department of Educational Psychology & Counseling, Faculty of Psychology and Education, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran. Email: hajhosseini@ut.ac.ir
3. Department of Educational Psychology & Counseling, Faculty of Psychology and Education, University of Tehran, Tehran Iran. Email: chajazi@ut.ac.ir
4. Department of Teaching Methods and Educational and Curriculum Planning, Faculty of Psychology and Education, University of Tehran, Tehran Iran. Email: keyvansalehi@ut.ac.ir

Extended Abstract

Aim

A significant aspect of human development occurs within the educational settings of schools and universities (Navarro & Tudg, 2023), and purposefulness has been identified as a key factor in well-being and development (Bronk, 2013; Kim et al., 2022). However, statistical data reveals a troubling trend: only one in five high school students can articulate their life purpose. This proportion remains largely unchanged upon entering university, where only one in three college students can discern their life's purpose (Damon, 2008). In his ethnographic study, Khosravi (2017) also finds that Iranian youth often describe their situation as "undecided." He convincingly argues that the absence of a secure transition from adolescence to adulthood is a major contributor to the purposelessness experienced by Iranian youth. Through fieldwork and insightful dialogues with teenagers, young adults, and educators, researchers have corroborated the prevalence of this phenomenon among Iranian youth.

Thus, the present study aims to identify the factors that contribute to fostering a sense of purpose within educational institutions, particularly at the school and university levels. Using a qualitative approach rooted in a constructivist worldview, the research design adopted grounded theory. Rather than focusing on theory-building, the researchers concentrated on the conceptual ordering aspect of grounded theory (Stough & Lee, 2021), emphasizing the classification and categorization of data. As a result, the findings occupy a space between theory and description.

Methodology

The study targeted the demographic of Iranian male elites, primarily residing in Tehran, aged 25 to 45. Purposive sampling was employed based on predefined criteria, informed by Iran's strategic document on elite affairs. Participants were selected based on their achievement or ongoing pursuit of significant life goals. Data were collected from 2022 to 2023 through semi-structured interviews, conducted either online or in person. Participants were identified through consultations with university professors, school teachers, principals, members of the National Elite Foundation, founders of successful start-ups, and career and educational counselors. Data saturation was reached after conducting interviews with 16 individuals. The interview protocol was guided by previous research, and data analysis followed Charmaz's (2014) initial and focused coding, employing constant comparative analysis at each stage. Transcript analysis was performed using MAXQDA version 18.2.5 software.

During the initial coding phase, the researchers employed a flexible approach to explore the data, coding line by line or unit by unit. They then refined the codes by merging, deleting, or modifying related codes to form subcategories. The researchers remained closely engaged with the data throughout this phase, adhering to Charmaz's (2014) recommendation to code predominantly in the "grounded" form. In the focused coding stage, the analysis shifted to a more abstract level. The researchers examined codes and subcategories conceptually, systematically evaluating, merging, modifying, and reconstructing subcategories to develop final categories and themes, ultimately achieving conceptual ordering.

Findings

The resulting conceptual framework identified three key themes that shape the context of purposeful development within schools and universities: Effective Relationships, Agency Experience, and Diversity Experience.

1. **Effective Relationships:** This theme encompasses the individuals and dynamics present in the environment of a purposeful individual, including teachers, tutors, university professors, and staff within school and university settings. These relationships play a crucial role in fostering purposefulness and providing support.
2. **Agency Experience:** Agency refers to the ability to act in alignment with one's desires and capabilities, with tangible outcomes reflecting these actions. This theme goes beyond self-efficacy, emphasizing a sense of utility and worth. Individuals who experience a strong sense of agency perceive themselves as active agents in their own lives, motivated to pursue goals and shape their futures.
3. **Diversity Experience:** This theme pertains to the exposure to and awareness of the different dimensions that individuals can explore within their academic, occupational, and familial spheres. Such exposure helps to develop self-awareness, especially regarding meaningful life goals.

Each theme consists of categories and subcategories contextualized within the educational setting:

- **Effective Relationships** in schools include categories such as the mentorship and coaching roles of school staff, personalized education, an integrated organizational culture, and diverse role engagement. In universities, the parallel categories involve problem-oriented and optimistic professors, the inclusion of successful guest professors, and the maintenance of relationships with accomplished graduates.
- **Agency Experience** in schools focuses on leveraging students' capabilities and fostering healthy competition. In universities, the categories include utilizing students' capabilities and applying a practical approach to university courses.

Diversity Experience in schools involves encounters with religious and spiritual atmospheres, as well as authentic exposure to various fields of action and knowledge. At the university level, the theme of diversity revolves around the opportunity to explore a wide range of academic disciplines.

Conclusion

The main themes identified in this study, derived from interviews with young elites, include effective relationships, agency experience, and diversity experience in both school and university settings. Schools and universities should create environments where students can engage with diverse fields of knowledge and practice, thereby fostering authentic experiences. Exposure to various domains challenges individuals' abilities and promotes self-awareness, guiding their future life direction. The experience of agency, gained through problem-solving, enhances self-efficacy and a sense of worth. This aligns with existing research, which emphasizes the role of self-regulation and agency in discovering life purpose (Van Tongeren et al., 2018; Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis et al., 2017). Effective relationships, especially with mentors and peers, also play a crucial role in supporting purpose development. Educators and peers can help students become more self-aware and motivated by

providing feedback, role models, and guidance. Finally, this research has some limitations, such as its focus on male elites in Tehran, suggesting the need for studies on women and other demographic groups, as well as further research to establish generalizable models of purpose development.

Keywords: Purpose in Life, Life Meaning, School, University.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure ethical compliance, consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. They were fully informed about the research methodology, its objectives, privacy protections, the audio recording of the sessions, and their right to withdraw from the interview at any time. Participants were assured that any references to their interview content would be anonymized and devoid of identifying details.

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Conflict of Interest

This research did not receive financial support from any organization or institution, and there are no sponsors or conflicts of interest to disclose.

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