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# Leading with Purpose? New Language and Lenses for Considering Educational Purpose and Analysis of Purpose Statements in Australia, Singapore, Finland and Japan

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# Leading with Purpose? New Language and Lenses for Considering Educational Purpose and Analysis of Purpose Statements in Australia, Singapore, Finland and Japan

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## Abstract

The purpose of education, viewed as a wicked problem, requires critical examination, particularly in the context of policy that may shape leadership in schools and systems. Given that purpose is a complex and multidimensional construct, it requires multiple frameworks for a comprehensive exploration. We build on Gert Biesta's three domains of education, qualification, socialisation and subjectification, by developing a novel typology of different perceived benefits of educational purpose and then explore the tensions inherent within these. The benefits typology is derived from the literature specifically exploring educational purpose since 2000, and we employ a tensional analysis framework to untangle competing and interrelated benefit perspectives and identify the paradoxes, dilemmas, dualities and dialectics inherent in purpose statements, which in turn have significant implications for the challenges educational leaders must navigate. We apply this new lens and language for reflection and consideration of purpose by using the framework to examine purpose statements from four international contexts (Australia, Singapore, Finland and Japan), illustrating new ways of conceptualising and analysing the complexity of educational purpose. By extending Biesta's framework with additional theoretical and practical approaches for educational leaders and researchers seeking to critically examine dominant purpose narratives, this paper makes a small but significant contribution to development of more holistic, sustainable and equitable conceptions of educational purpose in a rapidly changing and increasingly complex global landscape.

**Keywords:** wicked problem; leadership; tension; benefit



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## 1. Introduction

Educational purpose is an important, contested and controversial concept that should have a central place in academic discourse (Biesta, 2025). Presented with duality, where school-based education is a human right aimed at human flourishing, or a cog in an economic development machine, the side taken by leaders will greatly influence the rationale behind the annual investment of 4.2% (an equivalent of USD 5 trillion) of global GDP in education (The World Bank, 2023). Given the acknowledged inherent complexity of educational purpose (Biesta, 2009; Murray, 2023), educational leaders encounter an environment of tensions at a time when society faces unprecedented global challenges (Hadar et al., 2020; Zhao & Watterston, 2021).

Purpose, in and of itself, carries semantic complexity. The phenomenon of purpose has been described most primally as the thought that precedes an action (Warren, 1916).

Purpose, therefore, is associated with the prior thought of an individual that causes an action. Common contemporary usage of the term is associated with “knowing your why?” (Kaoun, 2019); however, knowing can be formed before, during and after an action is undertaken. Similarly, purpose-driven leadership refers to leadership that is centred around developing a shared understanding across an organisation of why actions are taking place (Cardona et al., 2019). Employing similar terminology but carrying additional meaning, the concept of a “purpose-driven” organisation describes framing an organisation toward purposes for the greater good, rather than being centred on more traditional metrics of success (Hollensbe et al., 2014). Purpose, in this case and within educational contexts, is often framed around serving the greater good of society; however, many of its deeper dimensions and underlying tensions remain unexplored. In this paper, we place a question mark deliberately after the phrase “Leading with purpose”, aiming at turning our attention to the tensions associated with the complex phenomenon of the purpose of education and leading with purpose.

Although appreciably philosophical in nature, the purpose of education has been studied empirically since Stemler and Bebell’s groundbreaking work in 1999, with ongoing research continuing today (Dallavis, 2024; S. Stemler & Bebell, 1999). These empirical studies are centred around the role that mission and vision statements have in enacting the overall purpose of education, with many academics suggesting that purpose and mission can be used synonymously (Allen et al., 2018; Bebell et al., 2020). Other scholars suggest that the field cannot consider the two interchangeable, with no available evidence to support this position (Coker, 2022). Purpose statements are often utilised as a marketing or branding tool (Allen et al., 2018); however, the language we use shapes the way we think—thus, school purpose statements often become embedded in the vernacular of education systems, influencing thought and practice at all levels.

Problematically, the enactment of purpose is overshadowed by a measurement agenda that superimposes itself over the fundamental purposes of education (Biesta, 2009). Gert Biesta advances our concept of purpose by presenting a theoretical framing that extends well beyond measurement agendas and includes the advancement of skills and knowledge, the socialisation of cultural values and the empowerment of individuals (Biesta, 2020) (Table 1). Purpose still lacks precision in its description in the literature, and leading in a complex world requires “elevation of purposes beyond the framing of modern schooling as a means to economic development underlying many of our assumptions and efforts to transform education systems” (Morris et al., 2023, p. 1).

**Table 1.** Gert Biesta’s three functions of education and associated key words.

Function	Definition (Biesta, 2009, 2015, 2020)	Key Words (Carter, 2019)
Qualification	The transmission of knowledge, skills and dispositions for a next phase of life.	Employment, further study, economic goals, skills, knowledge, talents and training.
Socialisation	The transmission of a set of cultures, traditions and practices that are representative of what is valued by a society.	Culture, traditions, values and capabilities.
Subjectification	The development of the student as a self-aware, autonomous individual that may choose to challenge the established social expectations of an individual.	Personal agency, self-identity and self-awareness.

While it may appear that vision and mission are used interchangeably in practice, vision relates to questions of what goals matter most and the kind of school that is aspired to (Hammerness, 2009). Mission, on the other hand, provides a direction of travel that

becomes the basis for measures of institutional effectiveness (Foley, 1995), connecting vision and mission to goals. Purpose and goals are linked by their capacity to describe why education takes place. They differ significantly in their capacity though, as goals are inextricably linked to measurable outcomes, while purpose is concerned with what learning is about and for (Biesta, 2020). Biesta's domains of purpose further underscore the inappropriateness of using purpose and goals interchangeably. While mission and goals are typically focused on learning, Biesta asserts that the purpose of education shines a light onto what is shadowed by this focus on learning: as students learn, they learn for a reason, and they learn from someone (Biesta, 2020).

In fields outside of education, mission statements are widely used as management tools with the potential to significantly influence employee engagement and organisational performance. As in education, however, their widespread adoption in management contrasts with the limited depth of scholarly investigation into their actual impact (Alegre et al., 2018). This highlights an opportunity to treat the phenomenon of purpose in education as a socially constructed complex or wicked problem (Houghton & Tuffley, 2015). Wicked problems are characterised by their constant change and can be categorised through the metaphor of a moving target. The purpose of education is articulated by a wide range of actors, across varied contexts, and for multiple, often competing, reasons (Murray, 2023).

Wicked problems, such as this, rely on interpreting the actor's conception(s) of the problem, and when the identification of actors is unclear, achieving a comprehensive interpretation becomes impossible (Houghton & Tuffley, 2015). This paper seeks to attend to these significant gaps by first developing a typology of perspectives on the purpose of education, and second by identifying and interpreting the types of tensions inherent in the wicked problem of educational purpose. To achieve these aims, the paper analyses purpose-orientated reform statements from four globally diverse contexts, focusing on the underlying perspectives of educational purpose, the nature of the tensions at play within purpose-orientated reform, and the implications of these tensions for educational leadership.

Educational leadership plays a crucial role in shaping national economies and identities (Grosvenor, 1999; Hanushek & Wößmann, 2007), as the goals of school-based education are enmeshed with broader ambitions for national prosperity and growth (Draxler, 2014). Globally, education policy and discourse have entered an era in which the Programme for International School Assessment (PISA) has become a dominant framework for conceptualising and measuring educational outcomes (Steiner-Khamsi & Walldow, 2018). However, if society wishes to preserve notions of education as a public good, it is essential to realign purpose away from this dominance (Draxler, 2014). The most fundamental question in education relates to its purpose (Biesta, 2015; Biesta et al., 2015), and any meaningful discussion about educational leadership is inherently rooted in this issue—a concern that has persisted since the beginning of formal schooling (S. E. Stemler et al., 2011). This study aims to critically examine education's multifaceted and often conflicting purposes by developing analytical tools with direct implications for educational leadership, employing Gert Biesta's domains of education and a tensional analysis typology. Accordingly, this research is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the benefit perspectives of educational purpose?

RQ2: What are the tensions relating to the purpose of education?

This paper's first research question does not aim to define the purpose of education, but rather to clarify who benefits from the stated purposes of education as evidenced in the literature from the past 25 years. A benefit perspective refers to who, or what, is intended to be advantaged through educational attainment. The second question aims to understand what key tensions emerge in relation to the purpose of education, and how these tensions influence educational leadership and reform. The paper is then organised as follows:

Section 2 outlines the research approach. Section 3 details the development of typologies, capturing various benefit perspectives and the tensions surrounding educational purpose. Section 4 applies these typologies and the tensional analysis framework to examine four international education reform movements. Section 5 presents a discussion of the findings, Section 6 outlines the study's limitations and offers directions for future research and Section 7 presents the conclusion.

## 2. Research Approach

### 2.1. Research Context

This paper is a part of a wider project, the Purpose Topography Project, which is a social impact project that aims to explore and map diverse perspectives on the purpose of education as evidenced in academic literature, system architecture, policy frameworks and school practices. The project aims to contribute to the global movement towards a redefined, sustainable and thriving future by analysing, synthesising and strengthening current understandings of educational purpose. Ultimately, the Purpose Topography Project seeks to identify how the purpose of school-based education is defined, positioned, integrated and aligned to other parts of the broader architecture of education systems.

### 2.2. Methodology

This research develops a methodological framework from a review of the literature and applies it to educational policy documents from four countries. The research frames the purpose of education as a wicked problem (Murray, 2023) requiring deeper analysis and develops the analytical approach from a systematic integrative review of research articles published between 2000 and 2025. The full mapping of this review, including findings from empirical research on purpose, is available elsewhere. The literature was obtained through a search of English-language literature that was centrally focused on the purpose of school-based education from the year 2000–2025 in the following databases: ERIC, Education Research Complete, Academic Search Complete, A+ Education and SCOPUS. The focus of this paper is on the development of a framework, including and expanding upon Biesta's, that enables new analyses of purpose by considering different perspectives of benefits and their tensions surrounding.

This is performed through three distinct research phases: (1) development of a typology of purpose benefit perspectives, (2) selection of a tensional analysis framework and (3) an illustrative example of how these typologies and frameworks can be applied, in this case to the goals of education from four international education contexts.

In the literature, the benefit perspectives of educational attainment are primarily framed as the tension between public and private purposes—those that “advance the interests of society as a whole” versus those that “promote the interests of individuals” (Cranston et al., 2010, p. 183). This dichotomy is insufficient to capture the diversity of perspectives, prompting the development of a more nuanced typology of benefit perspectives, and this prompted the specific analytic focus of this paper. Analysis followed three processes. Firstly, the characteristics of statements that defined or described the purpose of education from the literature were extracted. Secondly, these characteristics were grouped and then assigned a descriptive title that matched the language used within the literature. Finally, each benefit perspective was assigned its set of indicative characteristics and a quote from the systematic integrative review and aligned to an existing goal. This expanded the dichotomy to five benefit perspectives, namely individual, institutional, community/social, national and global.

To further examine these five perspectives, the research adopts the tensional analysis framework proposed by Smith and Lewis (2011), which effectively captures the contra-

dictory and interrelated elements identified in the systematic integrative review. This framework acknowledges that conceptual tensions often manifest as paradoxes, dualities, dilemmas and dialectics—phenomena that not only overlap but also persist over time. Such persistent tensions have been a distinctive feature of the educational purpose literature over the past 25 years (Smith & Lewis, 2011). The various tensions are defined as they are presented in the analysis findings.

In exploring the tensions between different perspectives in the literature, we look to understand the complexity of the purpose of education and its implications for educational leadership (Besana, 2010; Hong et al., 2017; Smith & Lewis, 2011). By framing these tensions analytically, leaders are presented with a structured lens through which to interpret and navigate the competing demands embedded in educational purpose (Besana, 2010). Categorising these tensions enables a more nuanced appreciation of these complex phenomena, providing a framework that can support the informed, context-sensitive decision-making required of leaders. (Hong et al., 2017). As Bakhtin and Holquist (1981) note, tension is inherent and inescapable in all social processes, reinforcing the relevance of a tensional analysis in this context.

Four countries were selected for analysis using the newly developed typology of benefit perspectives and tensional analysis framework: (1) Australia (Department for Education South Australia, 2023; Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2019), (2) Singapore (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2023), (3) Finland (Ministry for Education and Culture Finland, 2019) and (4) Japan (OECD, 2018). Each country was chosen based on the presence of a recent national or regional reform agenda that has been driven by goals that seek to redefine the purpose of education. The primary data sources for analysis were the official goals and associated policy documents underpinning these reform agendas. The analysis proceeded in two stages: (1) determining the benefit perspectives by examining how key words from the typology aligned with the language used in policy texts; and (2) identifying and classifying the tensions present using the tensional analysis framework developed by (Smith & Lewis, 2011). These four national contexts were selected not to provide a comprehensive comparative analysis of their systems, but rather to serve as illustrative cases. Their primary purpose within this research is to demonstrate the analytical utility of the proposed typologies of benefit perspectives and tensions when applied to real-world policy statements.

### 3. Developing Typologies

#### 3.1. Benefit Perspectives on Educational Purpose

While many researchers acknowledge the centrality of educational purpose in school-based contexts, they describe the benefits of education from different perspectives. This polarity is often presented as a dynamic tension rather than a fixed binary. As Mochizuki (2019, p. 91) cautions, “a vision of education as a tool for success in the ‘global knowledge economy’ must not be allowed to distract from an emphasis on the crucial role of schooling in promoting equity, valuing diversity, and fostering active, participatory citizenship”. This tension underscores the need for more nuanced and comprehensive analyses. Morris et al. (2023, p. 2) further argue that focusing narrowly on dominant narrative risks “overlooking other purposes” and missing the opportunity to explore “the multiplicity, complexity, and nuances” inherent in inclusive and equitable lifelong learning across diverse contexts.

In the available literature, individual benefit perspectives often intersect with broader societal aims, challenging simplistic categorisations. For example, Widdowson et al. (2015, p. 477) identified four interrelated student perspectives on educational purpose: “(1) to learn and gain self-knowledge; (2) to develop life and social skills; (3) to optimise life chances and quality of life; and (4) to enable future employment and economic wellbeing”.



These findings illustrate how personal development goals can align with or diverge from institutional or societal objectives. The five benefit perspectives identified in this study—along with their indicative characteristics, an indicative quote from the literature, and an example of this perspective drawn from international policy documents—are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** A typology of benefit perspectives from the educational purpose literature 2000–2025.

Perspective	Indicative Characteristics from Literature	Indicative Quote from Literature	Example from International Policy Documents
Individual Benefit	Empowering individuals, capabilities, autonomy, personal development, individual economic security, employable skills and qualifications, lifelong learning, moral qualities	“The key roles are the development of a free and independent individual and the development of a healthy and stable family. This finding emphasises the role of education in the fulfilment of individual or personal goals” (Rogosic et al., 2020, p. 461)	Self-directed learners who take responsibility for their own learning, are curious, reflective and persevering in the lifelong pursuit of learning, driven by their passion and purpose (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2023)
Institutional Benefit	Mission statements, unique characteristics of an organisation, qualification for tertiary pathways	“This resonated with worldwide criticism of schools’ inward-looking perspective, their unwillingness to innovate according to the wishes of outsider and recommendations from prior research” (Vanari & Eisenschmidt, 2022, p. 447)	Ensure South Australia’s public education system can unlock every child’s potential now and, in the future (Department for Education South Australia, 2023)
Community/Social Benefit	Moral qualities, community mindedness, collaborative capabilities, socialisation into cultural practices, civic awareness	“The purpose of education and the educators’ goal do not lie in a mass production of certified students to fit the job market ‘assembly line’ but carry the supreme responsibility to nurture the individuals as complete human beings with a sense of direction and moral uprightness that lends meaning and purpose to their lives” (Chitra & Gurung, 2021, p. 1)	Concerned citizens who are rooted to Singapore, have a strong civic consciousness, are responsible to their family, community and nation and take active roles in improving the lives of others (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2023)
National Benefit	Developing national economy, participation in a global economy, maintaining national political structures	Throughout history, two purposes of education have gained the most attention—civic responsibility and economic efficiency—with emphasis shifting from civic responsibility to economic efficiency over time. (Carpenter, 2005, p. 278)	The education sector will be flexible and capable of quickly responding to the needs of the economy and of a quickly changing global environment (Catherwood et al., 2003)
Global Benefit	Ecological sustainability, cohesive global economy, cohesive international relationships	“The key role of education is to transform the ‘attitudes of communities towards achieving peace’” (Nesterova et al., 2022, p. 114)	The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Sachs, 2014)

The individual benefit perspective encompasses statements of purpose that emphasises the qualification, socialisation and subjectification of learners—empowering individuals by

fostering personal capacity, cultivating capabilities and character traits, developing employable skills that enhance personal economic security and contributing to individual growth.

The institutional benefit perspective is reflected in statements of purpose that emphasise how educational institutions advance their own standing—often through distinctive mission statements and the promotion of unique organisational characteristics that differentiate them from competitors. While these statements may reference qualification, socialisation and subjectification, they are typically framed in ways that enhance institutional reputation, support competitive positioning and facilitate student progression to tertiary education.

The community/societal benefit perspective emphasises the role of education in fostering social cohesion through shared values and civic engagement, strengthening local economies via increased workforce participation and innovation and preserving cultural heritage while promoting and facilitating intergenerational connections.

The national benefit perspective is often articulated in the context of developing economies, where education is positioned as a driver of human capital development, technological innovation and global competitiveness. This perspective also encompasses the reinforcement of national identity and the preservation of political or spiritual structures. Within this frame, qualification is often prioritised as a means of developing a skilled and adaptable workforce to meet evolving economic demands. Additionally, educational purpose is linked to broader social outcomes, such as reducing reliance on social security systems by increasing employment, reducing poverty and decreasing incarceration.

The global benefit perspective is primarily reflected in international frameworks and statements of purpose and goals, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim to guide the world towards a more sustainable and equitable future (Sachs, 2014). This perspective recognises that educational development must integrate economic, environmental and social factors in this aspiration for sustainability (Sachs, 2014). While SDG 4 Quality Education specifically focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, education is also foundational to the achievement of many other SDGs (Nazar et al., 2018).

### 3.2. Typology of Tensions

The following four tensions are particularly applicable to the discourse on educational purpose and offer valuable insights for educational leaders (Smith & Lewis, 2011) (Table 3).

**Table 3.** A typology of tensions from educational purpose literature 2000–2025.

Tension	Characteristics	Example
Paradox	Contradictory tension with competing demands. Poles exist and persist simultaneously. Long-term solution meets demands of both poles	Public and Private purposes of education
Dilemma	Opposing alternatives each providing a logical solution. Advantages and disadvantages are evaluated. Long-term solution does not involve a consensus position.	Long and short-term development of students
Duality	Opposite poles exist within a system. Understanding one pole helps understand the other. Long-term solution	Socialisation and subjectification as a dual aspect of being a citizen.
Dialectic	Sustained process typified by creative tension. Integration of poles into a new position. Focus on similarities means long-term solutions may be temporary.	National measurement frameworks that seek to evaluate competing purposes of education.



### 3.2.1. Paradox

A paradox represents a form of contradictory tension in which both opposing demands must be addressed simultaneously, with long-term resolution emerging through the integration of both poles (Smith & Lewis, 2011). These competing demands are not easily reconciled but persist overtime as interdependent and coexisting forces (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In the context of educational purpose, a common paradox lies in the need to serve both public and private purposes—for example, advancing societal wellbeing while also supporting individual success.

### 3.2.2. Dilemma

A dilemma is a form of tension characterised by opposing yet rational alternatives, where decision-makers face pressure to choose one over the other (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In such cases, each option presents distinct advantages and disadvantages, and often no clear consensus is found (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In the context of educational purpose, a school may experience a dilemma of choosing between strategies that prioritise students' short-term academic achievement and those that foster their long-term development as lifelong learners.

### 3.2.3. Duality

Duality represents a tension in which opposing poles coexist within a whole system (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Understanding one side of a duality enhances the understanding of the other, highlighting their interdependence (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In the context of education, socialisation and subjectification may be seen as a duality within the concept of citizenship. Educational systems that teach social cohesion and those that promote individual autonomy are distinct yet interconnect aspects of the broader notion of citizenship (Biesta, 2020).

### 3.2.4. Dialectic

A dialectic represents a sustained process where progress occurs from the constructive clash of opposing ideas, fostering creative tension through their integration (Smith & Lewis, 2011). This dynamic interaction produces a new element, offering a novel solution to the problem at hand (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In a dialectic, the synthesis emphasises similarities rather than differences, suggesting that the integrated solution may be temporary and subject to further evolution as new tensions arise.

## 4. Analysing Four National Statements of Purpose Through Typologies of Perspectives and Tension

### 4.1. Australia

The Australian education system has historically been globally recognised for its excellence; however, recent trends show a decline in performance, both in absolute terms and relative to other OECD members (OECD, 2013). At the Australian Federal level, the Mparntwe Education Declaration gives some insights into the Australian Government's stated purpose through the dissemination of National Goals. There is a focus on the language of learning and achievement alongside qualification and socialisation (Biesta, 2015). If goals and purpose are aligned, then the purpose of Australian schooling is

1. The promotion of equity and excellence in Australian schools;
2. That all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2019)

However, this espoused purpose of education operates within a framework of goals and measurement that does little to prioritise or effectively operationalise this purpose (Kidson & Wilson, 2021). As a result, the purpose of education in Australia becomes a source of operational tension. A paradox is evident between the national measurement framework and the espoused goals of education. In a Federated system, the policies of the Federal Government should also be considered alongside the states (Beech et al., 2023). For example, South Australia, a state within the federal system, aims to “ensure South Australia’s public education system can unlock every child’s potential now and, in the future” (Department for Education South Australia, 2023). The purpose of public education in that state is for all “children and students learning and thriving” (Department for Education South Australia, 2023). This purpose is operationalised through four impact areas:

- (1) Wellbeing;
- (2) Equity and excellence;
- (3) Learner agency;
- (4) Effective learners (Department for Education South Australia, 2023)

The introduction of a new purpose statement as a lever for cultural change in South Australia highlights the importance system leaders place on top-down articulation and delivery of purpose—an approach that aligns with Biesta’s (2020) domains of qualification, socialisation and subjectification. In this local case, a duality emerges: as a state, operating within a federated national system promotes more individualised and short-term outcomes, which can be seen as at odds with the broader, more collective, orientations embedded in the federal policy architecture (see Table 4). How leaders at the school level navigate this duality is likely shaped by specific institutional histories and local community priorities, representing a crucial area for on-the-ground empirical research.

**Table 4.** Australia—sites of tension within Australian national statement of purpose.

Site of Tension	Tension Type	Implications
Goals vs. measurement framework	Paradox (persistent contradiction between the national goals and how they are measured, leading to confusion and inefficiencies in achieving educational purposes)	The measurement framework does not effectively prioritise or operationalise the espoused goals of education, leading to a disconnect between intentions and outcomes.
Federal vs. state	Duality (complementary opposites that are not being framed as a redefined middle ground)	State initiatives may present private purposes that conflict with national objectives, creating challenges in achieving educational equity and excellence across Australia.

#### 4.2. Singapore

Singapore has become a notable case in education internationally, being one of the few countries to demonstrate consistent improvement in student outcomes since its first engagement in PISA in 2009 (OECD, 2023). This progress is particularly noteworthy given Singapore’s already high baseline of achievement. Despite this sustained success, in 2022, the Singapore Ministry of Education reaffirmed its commitment to a clearly articulated educational purpose intended to provide a “common purpose for our educators, drive our policies and programmes, and allow us to consider how well our education system is doing” (Lee & Ho, 2022). Notably, the espoused purpose of education now closely reflects the values of educational philosophers, positioning students as individuals who “possess a good sense of self-awareness, a sound moral compass, and the knowledge, skills and dispositions to take on the opportunities and challenges of the future” (Lee & Ho, 2022).

The system's goals, as a part of the broader system architectures to deliver that purpose, include the following:

1. Confident persons who have a zest for life, have a strong sense of right and wrong, are adaptable and resilient, know themselves, are discerning in judgement, think independently and critically and communicate effectively;
2. Self-directed learners who take responsibility for their own learning and are curious, reflective and persevering in the lifelong pursuit of learning, driven by their passion and purpose;
3. Active contributors who are empathetic and open-minded, collaborate effectively in teams, exercise initiative, have courage to take risks responsibly are innovative and strive for excellence;
4. Concerned citizens who are rooted to Singapore, have a strong civic consciousness, are responsible to their family, community and nation and take active roles in improving the lives of others (Lee & Ho, 2022).

The effort to realign purpose within a system already regarded as highly successful by global standards offers valuable insights into the potential of purpose to act as a meaningful driver of change. In Singapore's case, the tension lies in balancing public and private purposes of education—navigating the dual imperatives of serving societal needs while supporting individual advancement (see Table 5).

**Table 5.** Singapore—Tension types in each stated goal of education.

Site of Tension	Tension Type	Implications
Benefit perspectives—individual vs. community.	Paradox	The tension between developing personal qualities (confidence, resilience) and societal standards (sense of right/wrong, effective communication) creates challenges for educators in balancing individual development with normative expectations. This requires flexible measurement frameworks and accountability architectures that honour student subjectification while meeting established competency frameworks.
Benefit perspectives—individual vs. national.	Dialectic	Students independently pursue their passions while operating within structured educational systems. This tension requires educational leaders to create frameworks that support individual agency (subjectification) while ensuring the acquisition of essential knowledge and skills needed for economic participation (qualification and socialisation).
Benefit perspectives—individual vs. institutional.	Duality	The tension between collaborative teamwork and individual initiative/risk-taking creates competing priorities for educators. Leaders develop assessment systems that value both individual excellence and cooperative abilities, requiring a fundamental shift from traditional evaluation methods that primarily reward individual achievement.
Benefit perspectives—community vs. national.	Dialectic	The tension between national identity/civic responsibility and individual contribution creates challenges in increasingly diverse societies. Educational leaders navigate between promoting national cohesion and allowing for multicultural perspectives.

#### 4.3. Finland

The Finnish education system gained international recognition following the release of the first PISA results in 2000, which displayed both exceptionally high student achievement and an extraordinary level of equity—described by some as a “miracle” (Kupiainen et al., 2009; Ustun & Eryilmaz, 2018). The current system is shaped by a range of key frameworks, including the National Core Curricula, the Finnish Basic Education Act, The Basic Education Plan of 2011, the 2016 Education Reform, and associated policies and operational structures developed by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Agency for Education (Ustun & Eryilmaz, 2018). Initially driven by political motives, the reforms aimed to maintain the highly valued autonomy of educators and schools, while sustaining Finland’s position as a high-equity and high-performing system (Lavonen, 2020). The reform process has been described as highly participatory, engaging stakeholders across all levels of the education system (Lavonen, 2020). Paradoxically, these reforms have been prompted by a steady decline in the very PISA results that once propelled Finland to global prominence (Lavonen, 2020). The stated purpose of Finnish education is “to support pupils’ growth into humanity and into ethically responsible membership of society and to provide them with the knowledge and skills needed in life” (Ministry for Education and Culture Finland, 2019). This purpose can be analysed through the lens of Biesta’s (2015) domains—particularly socialisation and qualification—but it offers a more limited articulation of subjectification, thereby highlighting tensions within the system (see Table 6).

**Table 6.** Finland—sites of tension and their implications in statement of purpose in Finland.

Site of Tension	Tension Type	Implications
Excellence vs. equity	Duality	Leaders must navigate system the expectation of maintaining high PISA results, while ensuring equity can create conflicting priorities in educational policies and practices.
Actors of purpose (autonomy of educators vs. system reform)	Paradox	Leaders may see conflict as reforms challenge the autonomy of educators, leading to tensions that are likely experienced and managed differently depending on the local school’s professional culture and its established norms for decision-making.
Socialisation vs. subjectification	Duality	The stated purpose of education aligns with traditional goals but may overlook deeper philosophical aspirations for student empowerment.

#### 4.4. Japan

A key development in Japanese education policy is the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology’s report, titled *To Cultivate Children’s Sound Minds that Develop a New Era*. This report signals a significant reorientation of Japan’s educational purpose—from a traditionally nationalistic focus to one that increasingly centres on individual goals and aspiration of students (Iuspa, 2013). This shift builds upon recommendations made in a report as early as 1984, which advocated for a pedagogical shift towards student autonomy, thereby aligning with the purpose of subjectification (Biesta, 2015; Freire, 2020; Yamanaka & Suzuki, 2020). Reforming Japan’s education system required substantial semantic, symbolic and operational changes that challenged longstanding Japanese cultural norms and values (Yamanaka & Suzuki, 2020). The policy goals that emerged from this reorientation reflect the envisioned role of education in shaping Japan’s future, including

1. Developing social competencies for survival: independence and collaboration in a diversified and rapidly changing society;

- 2. Developing human resources for a brighter future: initiating and creating changes and new values through leadership in various fields in society;
- 3. Building safety nets for learning: a wide range of learning opportunities accessible to individuals;
- 4. Building bonds and establishing vibrant communities: a virtuous circle where society nurtures people and people create society (OECD, 2018)

Tensions within Japan’s implementation of this purpose-driven reform (see Table 7) emerge from the interaction between nationally defined educational goals and the influence of international assessment and measurement frameworks. Following a decline in PISA performance in 2003 and 2006, policy attention shifted towards improving equity, with a particular focus on enhancing outcomes in underperforming schools (Yamanaka & Suzuki, 2020).

Table 7. Japan—sites of tension and their implications in statement of purpose in Japan.

Site of Tension	Tension Type	Implications
Benefit Perspectives—Individual vs. National	Paradox	The shift towards an individualistic mindset may conflict with traditional nationalistic values, creating confusion in educational purpose.

Across all four contexts, the rationale for educating young people is expressed semantically through vision statements, policy documents and national goals. These semantic expressions of purpose are then evaluated through both national and international measurement frameworks. However, there remains limited clarity regarding how these expressions of purpose align, interact, intersect or overlap across various levels of system architecture.

5. Discussion

This study introduces five distinct perspectives on educational purpose, namely individual, institutional, social/community, national and global. These perspectives expand upon existing theoretical models of the functions of education and allow researchers and leaders to ask the question, “for whom is education intended?”—a critical elaboration of Biesta’s (2020) call to interrogate the purposes of education beyond abstract ideals. Unlike singular or linear interpretations, this framework accounts for simultaneous operation and inherent tensions among these perspectives, which are often nested, overlapping or in conflict. By mapping these tensions, the framework provides a more nuanced lens and language for interpreting educational policies and discourses. While this paper has focused on analysing the espoused purposes articulated in national policy documents, it is crucial to acknowledge that the relationship between policy and practice is not linear or unidirectional. While a full understanding of leadership practice requires further contextual research, the analytical framework offered here provides a critical first step: a tool to deconstruct the very policy discourse that leaders are tasked with navigating. By clarifying the inherent tensions and competing benefit perspectives within this discourse, this study illuminates the complex terrain upon which leadership practice occurs.

This contribution complements Biesta’s (2015, 2020, 2025) philosophical articulation of the three domains of education—qualification, socialisation and subjectification—by situating them within the practical realities of policy formulation across diverse national contexts. Our research extends Biesta’s conceptual model by empirically illustrating how these functions are mediated through multiple benefit perspectives and tensions in real-world policy architectures. In doing so, it shifts the conversation from normative theory to applied analysis, revealing the complex policy architectures that shape, constrain and enable educational purpose across systems.

By analysing 25 years of international research and reform initiatives in four national contexts (Australia, Singapore, Finland and Japan), the paper seeks to map tensions in education sectors. The research findings from this study supports theoretical advancement and practical sense-making for educational leaders navigating the complexities of purpose-driven reform in diverse international contexts. In this study, we argue that the purpose of education is a socially constructed and inherently wicked problem—a challenge marked by ongoing evolution, contextual variability and tensions (Houghton & Tuffley, 2015; Murray, 2023). These complexities compel educational leaders to critically reflect on a fundamental question: What does it mean to lead with purpose in education?

Across the literature, educational purpose(s) is expressed through statements of goals, visions, measurement frameworks and philosophical positions (Allen et al., 2018; S. E. Stemler et al., 2011). These statements reflect divergent benefit perspectives. This paper provides a clarifying typology to support the analysis of such purpose statements, drawing from the diverse perspectives found in the four studied national contexts. These perspectives intersect with Biesta's (2015) philosophical framework—qualification, socialisation and subjectification—in nuanced and sometimes contradictory ways. Together, they reinforce the idea that the purpose of education defies a singular definition and is best understood as a dynamic, tension-laden domain that educational leaders must navigate and operate within.

A consistent theme across all four cases is the semantic clarity and aspirational nature of national purpose statements, often emphasising holistic development, civic responsibility and lifelong learning. However, these ideals frequently encounter friction when subjected to accountability frameworks of assessment and measurement such as PISA (Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2018). In all cases, education systems must negotiate between individual and collective aims, short and long-term outcomes and normative versus emancipatory educational goals (Cranston et al., 2010).

For instance, both Australia and Finland experience tensions between federal (or centralised) aspirations and more localised, context-sensitive implementations. In Australia, the paradox between national goals and their measurement creates a policy–practice gap, undermining efforts towards equity and excellence. Finland, despite its reputation for autonomy and equity, grapples with reconciling declining performance metrics with the philosophical autonomy of educators—what Lavonen (2020) frames as a paradox between systemic reform and professional freedom.

Similarly, Japan's reforms towards student-centred education—reflecting increased emphasis on subjectification—have introduced tensions with its historically nationalistic foundations. Japan exemplifies how shifts in policy purpose (from collective to individualistic goals) can create cultural and operational dissonance, especially in systems traditionally underpinned by conformity and group harmony.

Singapore, by contrast, provides a compelling example of purposeful alignment. It illustrates how a clear and unified statement of purpose can coexist with high performance and structured accountability. However, even here, dialectical tensions persist between public and private purposes and between fostering individual agency and upholding national identity. These tensions do not necessarily indicate dysfunction but reflect the dynamic interplay of values in an evolving system.

Importantly, the presence of tension should not automatically be interpreted as a flaw. In fact, tensions can serve as generative spaces where educational reform and reflection are possible, particularly at the local level where leaders and teachers must interpret and enact policy within their unique school contexts (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981; Smith & Lewis, 2011). For example, the duality between excellence and equity in Finland or the dialectic



between individual autonomy and national cohesion in Singapore offers opportunities for rethinking curriculum design, assessment systems and teacher professional development.

The typologies of paradox, dilemma, duality and dialectic (see Tables 3–7) allow a nuanced reading of how these tensions are experienced and managed. Paradoxical tensions, as in Australia and Japan, highlight systemic contradictions that may require foundational structural changes. Dualities, such as those seen in Finland, suggest complementary yet competing priorities that could benefit from adaptive leadership and policy coherence. Dialectics, evident in Singapore, represent dynamic tensions that may be best addressed through iterative and participatory policy-making.

Educational leaders operate within a complex and often contradictory landscape—what can be described as a wicked problem—in which they are not only agents of change but also embedded actors. This dual role adds to the complexity of leadership and decision-making. Our findings offer practical insights and applications that can guide leaders at all levels of education systems.

Firstly, leaders should assess the underlying perspectives that their statements of purpose reflect. Identifying whether these perspectives emphasise individual, institutional, social/community, national or global benefits enables leaders to ask not just what education is for but who it is for, and whose interests are being prioritised or marginalised.

Secondly, adopting a tensional analysis framework enables educational leaders to make sense of, articulate and strategically engage with the conflicting demands and priorities that characterises educational systems. This approach helps leaders recognise and navigate persistent paradoxes (for example, equity versus excellence), dilemmas (for example, short-term performance targets versus long-term developmental goals) and structural dualities and dialectics (for example, centralised standards versus local autonomy). Rather than seeking definitive resolutions, leaders can develop more nuanced, context-specific strategies suited to their unique contexts. Therefore, it is not only conceivable to envision the local management of these tensions, but we argue that providing leaders with the analytical language to do so is a critical step in navigating the wicked problem of educational purpose.

## 6. Research Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study is not without limitations. The analyses presented in this paper were not intended to provide a one-size-fits-all solution but to stimulate the discussion of educational purpose around. Our study is limited by its focus on four global north educational contexts and English-language studies, overlooking diverse global perspectives, particularly those in the global south, where different historical, cultural and political dynamics may shape educational purposes in distinct ways. Further, the studies analysed to develop the benefit perspectives were all in English, with the majority of papers coming from Europe, North America and Australia. The analysis of formal policy documents alone does not capture the lived experiences of educational stakeholders and local understandings that emerge in practice, which may lead to different benefit perspectives and tensions that are not captured in policy documents. Finally, our tensional analysis framework, while valuable, may privilege certain approaches over alternatives like critical discourse analysis or systems theory that could yield different insights. This study is focused on the espoused purpose as articulated in official documents and not the enacted purpose found in the daily practices of leaders and schools. This methodological choice was made to provide new language and lenses for high-level policy discourse that shapes the context for leadership, while also having utility in the daily practice of leaders.

These limitations point to fertile ground for future research. Addressing educational purposes as a wicked problem offers promising research avenue by exploring diverse

conceptualisations of this complex phenomenon. On the theoretical front, there are further opportunities for our ongoing Purpose Topography Project to apply this methodology across three levels: literature review, policy architecture analysis and practitioner-level empirical work. This multi-level approach deliberately surfaces divergences rather than assuming consensus, potentially opening new solution pathways for educational systems. Future research should explore participatory stakeholder approaches and investigate how measurement frameworks influence educational purpose tensions across contexts. In embracing the complexity of educational purpose, researchers and leaders alike can move towards more inclusive, adaptive and future-oriented education systems. While this paper provides the language and lenses to analyse this discourse, further research is required to investigate how espoused purposes are interpreted, negotiated and enacted by educational leaders in their local contexts. Finally, this study calls for future research to explore global contexts of different countries, in particular the global south. Future studies might usefully build on the analysis presented in this paper and longitudinally investigate this phenomenon.

## 7. Conclusions

This paper examined the critical importance of clarifying and addressing educational purpose as a central issue in educational leadership. This study tackled both theoretical and practical challenges around the purpose of education, with a particular focus on how educational leaders can make sense of, and act within, a landscape of competing and often conflicting purposes. Educational leaders engage with tension within the diversity of perspectives represented in statements of purpose—individual, institutional, social/community, national and global—demonstrating the conceptual complexity leaders must navigate. Each studied nation presents a statement of purpose, or set of goals, that represents the complexity of the differing benefit perspectives; however, there remains an opportunity for leaders to apply a tensional analysis lens more clearly to the purpose of education. The comparative study reveals that the articulation of educational purpose is not merely a semantic or symbolic exercise, but a foundational component of system design. It is through this articulation—and the navigation of its inherent tensions—that education systems define what they value, whom they serve and how they envision the future. Rather than seeking to eliminate tension, policymakers and educational leaders might better focus on embracing it as a necessary condition for meaningful and responsive education reform. Integrative frameworks that embrace the complexity of educational purpose, allowing leaders to navigate tensions without resorting to oversimplified, reductive solutions, are key to developing solutions that have long-term sustainability.

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