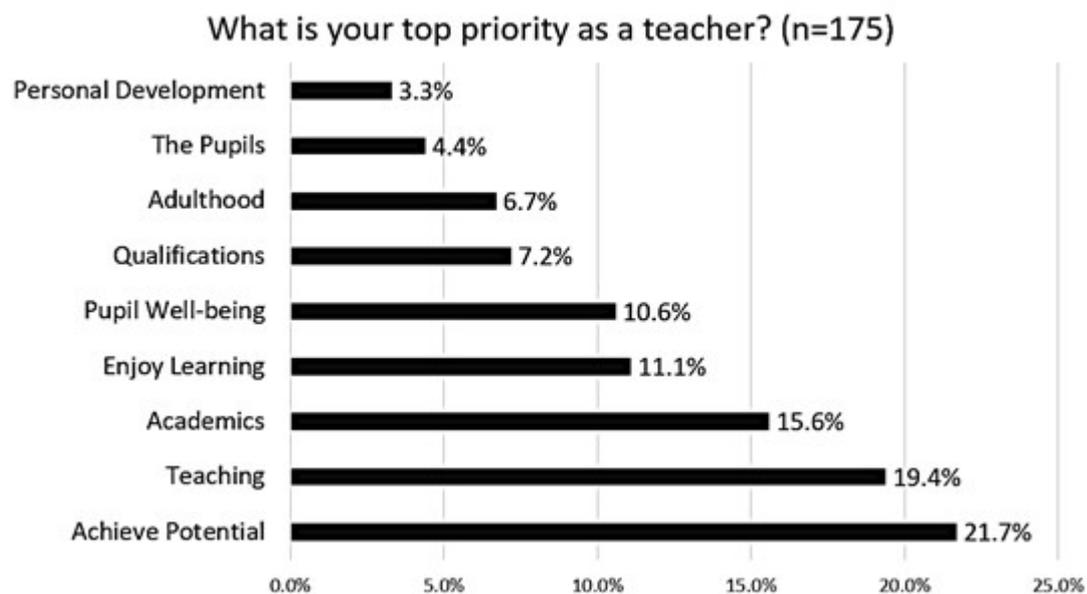


<https://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/drkevinsmith/aphorisms-axioms-finding-purpose-in-teaching/>

One of [Nietzsche's](#) aphorisms states "[If you have your why for life, you can get by with almost any how.](#)" An [aphorism](#) is a "pithy observation which contains a general truth." For Nietzsche, aphorisms (unlike axioms), provide the potential for meaning-making in a short and succinct form. Nietzsche held the key motivation in life was the search for meaning, even if it led to unhappiness. Viktor Frankl, another celebrated and [controversial](#) existentialist and psychiatrist held a similar view. His logotherapy, a form of existential therapy, was largely informed by his belief that to be fully human is to search for meaning, and the search for meaning can provide us with purpose.

In 2013, I was a researcher on the [WISERDEducation Multicohort Study](#) – a longitudinal study involving over 2000 pupil participants in over 29 schools across Wales. One of my favourite topics we addressed was "teachers' priorities." I believe by understanding teachers' priorities, we can come to understand their sense of "purpose." We surveyed 216 teachers and asked "what is your highest priority as a teacher?" We received 175 open-ended responses which were coded ([Scott's Pi .87](#)) through iterative analyses into the following themes: Academics, Achieve potential, Adulthood, Enjoy learning, Personal development, Pupil well-being, Pupils, Qualifications and Teaching.

Frequency of Themes



The themes directly reflect teachers' responses. Some responses were literally "the pupils" or "help pupils achieve their potential" while others were more descriptive: "That my class are happy, confident and eager to learn."

Limitations

Priorities – or “purpose” in teaching cannot be easily understood through a questionnaire. This analysis is just a starting point. Interviews and other qualitative methods are more useful in teasing out teachers’ priorities in their work, but these responses are still useful. Some responses were short and to the point “GCSE results” or “Pupil well-being.” Others were more detailed, “Teach the children 9 am-3.30pm and give them the best possible education. Continue in the job! Reduce purposeless paperwork.” Most replies were somewhere in between: “to make every child’s school experience worthwhile” or “To keep my performance data in line with what is expected.” Still, whether they are perfunctory, or a refinement of a more sophisticated priority, the responses provide an intriguing insight into teachers’ motivations and sense of purpose.

What I find most striking is over 20% of teachers’ responses referred to pupils achieving their potential. Unlike an aphorism, this seems like a type of axiom – a self-evident truth that doesn’t require further investigation or scrutiny. It is a desirable aim, but is it a reasonable goal? In my opinion, “help pupils achieve their potential” is a superficial response – a slogan with no actionable meaning. It’s what we say when we don’t know what else to say. Think about this phrase and ask yourself the following questions:

What is potential?

1. Do pupils possess the same amount, or type(s) of potential?
2. Is potential a singular quality or does it have varied embodiments, performances, applications and trajectories?
3. Is it possible to achieve our potential, or do we only ever fulfil a portion of it – how do we know the difference?

What must we do to help pupils achieve their potential?

1. To achieve something, we must know its limits. How can we achieve something without there being an end? Where does a pupil’s potential end?
2. What happens when a pupil raises their hand in a lesson and says “Miss, I... I think I just achieved my potential?” What are the consequences of achieving our potential? Is it desirable to achieve our potential?
3. What is needed to measure potential? What is the method for measuring potential and what is the theoretical rationale for it? Where are these tools? How are they derived and by whom?

Aims in education are dominated by aphorisms and axioms, some are useful, many are not. The [new curriculum framework for Wales](#) is organised around “four purposes, (4Ps)” and whether they are “aphoristic” or “axiomatic” is up to

individual analysis, but what we can't afford is to have the 4Ps act as proxies for teachers' priorities. Teachers' priorities can align with them, but if they are simply adopted by educators they can be reduced to less-useful slogans like "help pupils achieve their potential."

Where do we go we from here?

Over the next few posts, I'll present further, initial analyses of these data and discuss why purpose and "aims-talk" in education are crucial for a "good education." I'll discuss Frankl in more detail and how his concept of meaningfulness, significance and purpose have potential links to [Bandura's](#) concepts of efficacy, and how this relates to teaching.

Reflective Questions

- 1.) What is your top priority as a _____? Why?
- 2.) How do you find meaning as a _____?
- 3.) How might you know if you are achieving your purpose?