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Between structure and individual needs: a discourse-analytic study of support and guidance for students with special needs in Finnish vocational education and training

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ABSTRACT

The reformed Finnish vocational education and training (VET) system is a competence-based, customer-oriented educational programme with two overarching aims: to develop a skilled labour force and to promote social inclusion. Support and guidance have become increasingly important in Finnish VET in recent decades. This study focuses on how linguistic constructions of support and guidance for VET students with special educational needs are constructed in the dynamics between institutional ideas and the language use of VET staff. Data were collected through focus group discussions among different categories of staff. Through a psychological discourse analysis, three different linguistic constructions emerged: a package of support measures, a structure falling apart and dialogue as a bridge builder. Tensions and contradictions were identified between the different constructions. The results point to the need for balance between institutional structures and the possibilities of staff that daily interact with the student to provide holistic support measures.

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Introduction

The winds of market forces and neoliberalism are blowing in Western societies. As in many other areas, these features can be identified in vocational education and training (VET). Several researchers (e.g., Hardy et al., 2020; Kettunen & Prokkola, 2022; Niemi & Jahnukainen, 2019) have examined and questioned this development. The discourse of neoliberalism brings with it a language in which concepts such as market efficiency, the customer and competitive are used in increasingly diverse contexts (Holborow, 2015). In an educational context, neoliberalism has contributed to a changed view on how to organise education and even to questioning the purpose of education, with an increased focus on employability and adaptation to the needs of the labour market (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019). Another global trend in contemporary societies is new public management (NPM), a state project in which a neoliberal agenda is imposed on society (Roberts, 2014). By borrowing ideas from the private sector, the overall goal of NPM is to improve performance, efficiency and quality in the public sector. This trend applies to education as well. Although Finland, like many other countries, has an interest in finding efficient and low-cost solutions, its approach to NPM has been cautious – at least at the basic education level (Kiilakoski & Oravakangas, 2010). However, the influence of NPM is more

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prominent in higher education and VET (Uljens et al., 2016). Policies and decisions taken at the European Union (EU) level, which are in line with neoliberal discourses and NPM, aiming to meet the needs of the working life (e.g., Helsinki Communiqué, 2006; Riga Conclusions, 2015), have strongly influenced Finnish VET over the two last decades.

The most radical Finnish VET reform to date was launched in 2018 and arose from the need to increase the societal impact of VET and to manage a concurrent situation of decreasing financial resources (Government Bill, RP 39/2017, 2017). Even though the pace of VET development had previously been rapid, the reform brought with it fundamental changes in the Finnish VET landscape; a uniform VET system for all students replaced the previous dual system of curriculum-based youth education and independent adult education. The fixed duration of study (three years) was abolished in favour of a competence-based and customer-oriented system with individual study time, in which previously acquired skills and competences are recognised. To document their personal study paths, all students have a personal competence development plan (PCDP). VET is performed in close cooperation with working life, and terms such as impact and effectiveness are stressed (Finnish National Agency for Education [FNAE] & Ministry of Education and Culture, 2018).

In recent decades, European VET has acted as a guarantee of economic growth and excellence by providing a skilled labour force, but also for promoting social inclusion and preventing marginalisation among youth (see Kettunen & Prokkola, 2022). Thus, students at risk of marginalisation, such as those with special educational needs (SEN), are guided to VET as it is often considered a more suitable alternative for these students than upper secondary general education (Kauppila et al., 2021). The dual mission of VET implies a balancing act that makes education providers responsible for creating learning environments that empower learners to reach their highest potential, enabling them to secure employability and quality of life (cf. Cedefop, 2015). This ambitious goal gives support structures a central place in education. According to Finnish VET policy documents, all students are entitled to support and guidance, with measures documented in their PCDPs (FNAE, 2021). If students with SEN need extended support in their studies, they are entitled to special or intensified support (Act on Vocational Education and Training [AVET], 531/2017, 2017). The policy documents provide examples of support measures but do not regulate the content and implementation of guidance, leaving it up to the VET providers to create the necessary structures.

Our area of interest in the current study is support and guidance for students with SEN within Finnish VET. As Björk-Åman et al. (2021) point out, research on special needs education in upper secondary VET is sparse. Research on educational actors that affect and implement support focuses mainly on special education teachers and special vocational education teachers (e.g., Bell et al., 2014; Pirttimaa & Hirvonen, 2016). In a systematic description of Finnish vocational special education over time, Hirvonen (2012) stresses need for extended support structures and increased knowledge of special education solutions among VET teachers. Regarding guidance, Kalalahti et al. (2020) studied transition processes from basic to secondary education and found that the support needs of students with SEN are not adequately acknowledged in guidance, resulting in insufficient consideration of their educational hopes and ambitions. Niemi and Jahnukainen (2019) arrived at similar conclusions. Emphasis on individual responsibility and self-governing does not offer all students a stable learning environment. Students who need educational support due to learning difficulties or other challenges are especially vulnerable. A study by Rosenblad et al. (2022) on counselling in VET points to the contradictions arising from accountability frameworks and professionals' perceptions of their own pedagogical values and preferences. Although the study does not focus particularly on students with SEN, the results reveal a disparity between students' needs and requirements regarding accountability measures affecting the work of teachers and counsellors within VET.

Finnish VET: context

In Finland, upper secondary education comprises a parallel system with separate paths for general upper secondary education (GUS) and VET (e.g., Nylund et al., 2018). Since 2021, education has

been compulsory until a person turns 18 years old or has completed upper secondary qualifications (Government of Finland, 2019). Thus, studies in upper secondary education are more or less mandatory. Finnish VET is a popular educational track, with more than 40% of the youth who complete basic education choosing VET as their alternative to upper secondary education (Cedefop, 2019), while the majority choose GUS. A Finnish VET exam at the initial level consists of vocational units (145 competence points) and common units/general subjects (35 competence points), comprising 180 competence points (Studyinfo, 2021). The objective of Finnish VET is twofold (AVET, 531/2017, 2017). First, the goal is to improve and maintain the professional competence of the population, develop working life, respond to the need for skilled staff and support lifelong learning and professional development. Second, VET targets student development on individual and societal levels by supporting students' growth as good, harmonious and educated persons by providing them with the knowledge and skills they need for further studies and professional and personal development. The twofold objective reflects the goal of Finnish education: to promote excellence and social inclusion (cf. Kettunen & Prokkola, 2022). To achieve this objective, students' rights to instruction, support and guidance are emphasised (AVET, 531/2017, 2017; FNAE, 2021).

While support is presumably important for all students, we assume that it is particularly important for students with SEN as they are more likely to face challenges in completing their studies than other students (Kirjavainen et al., 2016). Concerning support in studies, the VET reform in 2018 brought with it minor but important changes. The concept of special support (SS) replaced the previous concept of special education, describing the activity of supporting students with SEN. SS is intended for students who "due to learning difficulties, disability, or illness or for any other reason need long-term or regular special support in their learning and studies" (AVET, 531/2017, 2017, p. 64§). In 2021, approximately 11% of all students in Finnish VET received SS (Vipunen, 2021). The definition of the target group is broad, and no expert assessment or diagnosis is required. However, a regulated process containing an initial assessment of the support need and a hearing with the student and the guardians precede the support decision. The teacher responsible for SS plans the support in collaboration with the students and their other teachers. FNAE (2021) mentions some possible forms of support, such as adaptations of the learning environment, various aids for learning and practising study skills.

Guidance services are also crucial in VET. The term guidance usually relates to teaching and learning at school and on the job, as well as to career choices and professional growth. In the present study, it is used as a general term to cover all the systematic guidance-related support measures given by teachers, supervisors, study counsellors and workplace representatives during the students' time in VET. As a pedagogical practice, guidance is more of a collaborative and interactive process than teaching (FNAE, 2014). It is also a holistic phenomenon that considers professional work-related and personal development goals (AVET, 531/2017, 2017). Guidance practices in Finnish VET rest firmly on a holistic guidance model (e.g., Juutilainen & Rätty, 2017). The focus areas in the model originally developed by Watts and Van Esbroeck (2000) are educational, professional and personal guidance. Educational guidance comprises guidance on educational options and learner support choices, professional guidance relates to choices about and placement into occupations and work roles, and personal guidance concerns personal and social issues. Guidance, which can be either individual or occur in a group, is the responsibility of all VET staff engaged in students' learning and well-being. Information about the student's needs for support and guidance services is included in the PCDP.

Theoretical lens

We regard support and guidance as activities with the overall goal of promoting individual work-related competences, life-long learning and social justice (OECD, 2004). Our entrance to the area is a theoretical approach where discourse is the key concept. A discursive approach seemed suitable for investigating how staff within VET institutions argue for, communicate and implement policy-

level reforms within a neoliberal and market-oriented agenda (cf. Fischer & Gottweis, 2012). We draw on the ideas of discursive institutionalism (DI) outlined by Schmidt (2008, 2012), who considers neoliberalism a kind of background idea on different levels in society. In line with DI, an institution is defined as both constraining and enabling structures and constructs, with the actors not only creating and maintaining but also changing the institution (Schmidt, 2008). Schmidt (2008) sees discourses as fundamental and dynamic factors behind institutional change, where discourse is understood as an interactive process of conveying ideas in different societal arenas. Ideas, which are the substance of discourse, develop in talk and text through two types of arguments: cognitive and normative. Cognitive arguments are arguments of necessity, while normative arguments relate to ideology and worldview (Schmidt, 2008). Through an exchange of ideas, actors in institutional contexts convey, shape, contextualise and challenge policy (Schmidt, 2012). As our focus is on the interplay between institutions as enabling and constraining contexts and the ideas, thoughts and words of those who act within the context, DI helps us understand how support and guidance are constructed, shaped, articulated and communicated (cf. Schmidt, 2012).

Method, data and analysis

The aim of this study is to identify how linguistic constructions of support and guidance for VET students with SEN are constructed in the dynamics between institutional ideas and the language use of VET staff. We understand linguistic constructions as parts of discourses used in texts and talks that individuals can access and employ.

The empirical data for this study were collected within the Finnish nationwide project Right to Learn—Skills to Teach (HAMK, n.d.), which aimed to develop support systems and multi-professional guidance in teacher education for upper secondary school. This article focuses on discourses on support and guidance within VET institutions. We understand discourse as thinking and talking about a specific object or phenomenon within an institutional context and embrace the definition by Potter (1996) of a discourse as “talk and texts as parts of social practices” (p. 105). Taking inspiration from DI, we are particularly interested in studying how global ideas – in our case, VET policies – are translated into a local context of a VET institution by actors within the context who convey, shape, contextualise and challenge policy (cf. Schmidt, 2012; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018).

Focus group interviews were used as the data collection method. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviews in spring 2020 were conducted virtually. Focus group interviews offer the opportunity for relatively natural discussions, in which respondents can share ideas, talk, comment and question other group members’ statements within the given framework (Cyr, 2019). In a focus group discussion, the interviewer initiates the topic, often using stimulus material to encourage the participants to discuss their own thoughts and experiences freely (Xerri, 2016). The stimulus material in this study consisted of extracts from the AVET (531/2017, 2017 section 61), as well as research-based statements related to students with SEN (e.g., on challenges with completing studies). The researchers introduced the material using a PowerPoint presentation in the virtual meeting. In the presentation, a fictional prospective student, Anna, who had received special support in basic education, was briefly introduced to emphasise the discussion focus on what kind of support and guidance the respondents would like to offer the student.

The focus groups consisted of staff from one VET provider. Cooperation with the VET provider – a semi-large actor offering versatile study programmes – had already been established within the project. The data analysed in this study included material from nine focus groups with a total of 41 participants. The groups were selected with the support of staff in leading positions and were formed according to the VET provider’s organisational model so that each group consisted of staff with similar tasks and/or positions in the organisation. However, three groups were heterogeneous in terms of working tasks/employment and included persons who had no colleagues with similar tasks. The criteria for the focus groups of vocational and general subject teachers were that they should be as heterogeneous as possible with respect to gender, age, field, and teaching

experience. Most participants were initially contacted by telephone and then sent an email with a detailed description of the study. All gave their consent to participate in the study. The focus groups are presented in [Table 1](#).

Both researchers were present at all the focus group discussions, while each informant group participated once. The discussions lasted approximately one and a half hours.

The focus group discussions were recorded with consent from the participants to allow for later transcription. Two research assistants carried out the transcription, which included non-verbal features, such as pauses and laughter. One researcher (the first author) had the main responsibility for the analysis. The data consisted of approximately 140 pages. In analysing our data, we used linguistically oriented psychological discourse analysis (see Potter, 1996; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The analysis proceeded in several steps. First, all sequences in the data related to the research aim were identified. At this stage, it was crucial to discover *what* the focus group participants spoke about. After an initial, rough categorisation of content, the focus shifted to the question, *How* do the focus group members talk about support and guidance? The content of the categories was given different labels, such as student-oriented, system-oriented, warmly, far from the student, personal, impersonal, the active student and the passive student. The relationship between a description and alternative descriptions and how such relationships are constructed in the argumentation interested us; that is, how do respondents choose to describe the phenomenon under discussion, and what is the purpose of the description? After careful reading of the transcripts, we selected seven sequences for detailed analysis. The choice of sequences was based on representativeness, relevance and clarity. Next, discourse analysis techniques described by Potter (1996) and Wetherell and Potter (1992) were adopted. The analysis resulted in three different linguistic constructions or versions of support and guidance for students with SEN within the institutional discourse of VET.

Trustworthiness and ethics

Relativism is often associated with discourse analysis. However, we claim that our analytical tools help distance us from our research data, that transparency in our research process validates our study, and that the study thus has scientific value (see Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The process in discourse analysis can be seen as constructions of constructions, making us, as researchers, co-constructors in our research project. The linguistic constructions derived from our analysis must be considered not as objective facts or distinct entities but as flexible designs that complement and intersect with each other.

The study was conducted in line with the Finnish ethical principles of research with human participants (Finnish National Board of Research Integrity, 2019). The researchers carefully informed the participants, both verbally and in writing, about the purpose of the study and the focus group interviews.

Table 1. Participants in the focus groups included in the current study.

Focus group	Main task among group members	N
1	Leading staff: support services	4
2	Leading staff: education	4
3	Counsellors and coordinators	6
4	Vocational teachers (most also personal supervisors)	5
5	Vocational teachers (most also personal supervisors)	5
6	General subject teachers	5
7	Working life coordinators	5
8	Vocational supervisors	4
9	Special education teachers	3
	Total	41

Results

The linguistic constructions or versions of support and guidance for students with SEN within the institutional discourse of VET found in the analysis are 1) a package of support measures, 2) a structure falling apart and 3) dialogue as a bridge builder.

A package of support measures

The linguistic constructions made by the respondents within the institutional discourse can be understood in several ways. One starting point may be emotional distance versus closeness, which the construction creates in relation to the students. The description below is an extract from a focus group with leading staff. The description creates a relatively large distance from the fictional student (Anna), with focus placed on the structures in the support system.

So now, the question is how much does Anna want support at all, and what is the assessment of what kind of support she needs. So is it like special education support, or is it extra guidance, or is it the vocational coach who now takes over? Is it so that in the middle of everything, she benefits from an apprenticeship period at the end or something so in that we might have the working life coordinators giving more guidance? We don't really know how things will work out for her, but probably she's got enough of a package, and we need to describe that package for her.

The linguistic construction chosen conveys the image of a process-oriented, well-structured, efficient and standardised way of working. Through the emphasis on the system, rather than Anna, in the description, a staff that functions efficiently emerges (cf. Börjesson & Palmblad, 2008). The respondent describes three different forms of support in Anna's studies. The use of a so-called three-part list (Potter, 1996) is a way to reinforce what is said and to rhetorically convey the importance of the matter. An interesting feature of the construction is the lack of connection between the various support measures. While this lack does not mean that connections do not exist, for some reason, they are omitted from the current description. The work of supporting students is based on an "assessment" – a frequently used concept in school contexts that relates mainly to the evaluation of students' knowledge. The student has traditionally had little influence on assessments other than to perform as well as possible.

Throughout the construction, Anna is presented as a relatively passive object, first in the assessment process and later as a recipient of the support "package". She is assigned a few simple tasks; she needs to understand, accept and receive support. The process of describing the support to Anna could be understood as a type of guidance activity, though mainly in the form of staff-led counselling, contrasting sharply with a more reflective dialogue.

The rhetorical construction also categorises the staff of the VET provider; "We", the staff, are the ones who presumably assess, describe and deliver the support to the student, suggesting a position of power. The staff can be assumed to have knowledge of the standardised structures that a student at least initially lacks, making Anna dependent on the staff to navigate her way to adequate support. The construction does not include space for Anna to resist the conclusions drawn through the assessment or to reject parts of the support package. Criticism of the structures within the institution, and thereby the institution itself, also falls outside the direct scope of the description. The main challenges concerning support and guidance for students in the current focus group are students "who absolutely do not accept help, they refuse", parents "who think that the child does not need help" and teachers who often take too long to react to students' support needs. Thus, challenges regarding support are set at an individual rather than a structural level.

In the following example, we hear teacher voices. Our interpretation is that the descriptions fit into the "package of support measures" due both to the clear emotional distance to the students and the rather loose connections between different support measures and actors in them. On the one hand, the support structures can act as relief for teachers, who can pass students on to the next actor within the support structure. On the other hand, this delegating can also be understood as

undesirable as the previously autonomous teacher ends up placing responsibility on the support structures and other actors to do a job that the teachers think belong to themselves.

[Initially describing reduction in the number of supervisors in vocational subjects working close with the student in one's own sector] ... to see this weak student who we would like to have become at least a good, harmonious person, so we can't do that anymore, so they fall out. We have to send them to the school counsellor directly. We can't take care of them ourselves anymore.

The involvement of the school counsellor, who represents the support structure, is described as a failure originating from limited human resources in the teacher's own sector. In the past, there were more resources, and teachers could support or "take care of" the "weak" students without the involvement of the support structures. Collaboration opportunities between different actors in the support structure are left outside of the construction in this description, with the support structure picking up where the teacher's assignment ends or becomes impossible. In the description, a categorisation of the students appears. Once again, the student is an object of nurture, with little regard given to the student's own will, participation and responsibility. The description is an excerpt from the discussion about the two objectives for VET (vocational competence and development into good human beings) stressed in the law (AVET, 531/2017, 2017). The construction reveals a ranking of the two objectives, where the professional perspective is superior.

A structure falling apart

In the focus groups with vocational teachers/personal supervisors (PSs) in particular, uncertainty and doubt about the support structures emerged. For example, are time and resources available to draw up the PCDP together with the students in the initial phase of their studies? In this version, the students are given a clearer place in the structure as individuals, and the structures are now described as challenged by framework factors, such as time and resources. The focus groups with vocational teachers/PSs also reveal that the structures sometimes demand an unreasonable amount of work and time spent on documentation from the teachers: "We have to write in the PCDP whether they [the students] move around or if they cough or something."

Another critical system element is the claim that the support structure makes demands, but its processes do not lead to any results.

Andrew: I was thinking, we do what Lena says, that now we PCDP them, and then we find out that half the class has received some kind of special education, they have been in resource classes, and they have received every support possible. Then we find out that we have 9 out of 18. So, what happens then? Nothing. That's when we would need to get another adult to maybe be able to help the half of the class that needs support. That would be a natural continuation of lower secondary school, but there are no resources for that, either. So then it becomes a bit of a stumbling block, the whole PCDP thing and everything, that it doesn't really lead to anything as I see it.

Chris: Well, you're absolutely right, Andrew. You shouldn't go in and discuss with them and make them feel that now they're getting something – now someone cares about this. But then nothing happens.

Andrew (vocational teacher/PS) describes how he tries to rely on the support structure, doing what he is supposed to do and creating a PCDP with the student. However, then "nothing happens", which can be interpreted as the support structure failing. Andrew's description initially distances and objectifies the student, which may show that the process in standardised structures functions independently of the student and that a teacher doing his part of the job is still left in difficulty. To support his story, Andrew highlights student heterogeneity and the challenges he faces as a teacher. In the middle of his description, Andrew shifts the construction. As emotional closeness to the students increases, the students are transformed into subjects that need help. This move is rhetorically persuasive: Andrew is a teacher who is concerned about his students. The chosen construction presents both Andrew and his students as victims of the support structure; neither receives what they deserve.

Andrew concludes that support “doesn’t really lead to anything”, which contrasts with all the support measures listed in the first version presented (“a package of support measures”). Andrew wants “another adult”, which does not seem to be a support measure offered in the structure. That the PCDP process, and the resulting increased knowledge about individual students’ needs, might lead to specific support measures for Andrew is left out of the description. It could be assumed that Andrew could use the information to individualise instruction and guidance. Such a rhetorical move would, however, undermine the constructed version.

While Andrew primarily takes a teacher’s perspective, Chris, the vocational teacher/PS who responds to Andrew’s post, focuses on the students. The construction is very close to and caring of the students, making Chris’s own position a moral subject. In the focus group discussions, these types of descriptions are rare. In Chris’s rhetorical construction, it is ultimately students who should “feel that now they’re getting something” and that “someone cares about this”. Chris raises the risk that the entire initial PCDP process does not result in measures that are beneficial to the students, and, thus, the structure is failing them. What, therefore, should be done if the PCDP process and the support structure are not functioning well? In a later excerpt, Chris elaborates on his thinking.

I think it’s important that they [the students] feel at home, and that they feel “I can stay here”. I can imagine staying here for three years, and that’s an incredible gain. And then there’s these other things that will probably be part of the deal.

Instead of relying on support structures, Chris focuses on a more mundane approach. His aim is for the students to “feel at home”, which could be interpreted as feeling safe, being seen and having an overall good feeling about being at school. In his description, the structure for guidance and support can be understood as almost unnecessary and replaceable with a homelike environment.

Dialogue as a bridge builder

In the third version of the institutional discourse of guidance and support, individual conversations included in the structure become a way of uniting the needs of the students with available support measures. In the excerpt below, a teacher, Emma, initiates both in the meeting with the student and potentially relevant support measures.

Emma: I always sit down with the student quite early on and discuss, just me and the student. Try to create some kind of trust and discuss with the individual what it takes for them to do well. What do you need? Do you need to have oral exams, or do you need to have all the material copied or something like that. But I don’t know, if you do this early on, I think you can often create a kind of yes, consensus that is easy to understand. Of course, [you can] also keep more contact with the special education teacher.

Initial contact with the student plays a central role in this description. It is about “trust”, “consensus” and discussion with the individual, which can be compared to the initial structure-focused version, where suitable support measures were merely “described” to the student. In this case, the support measures are concrete and meet the student’s everyday needs at school, which may make it easier for the new student to judge the possible benefits of the support measures. However, a certain similarity to the initial “support package” is evident in the apparent repertoire of support forms from which to choose. It is not clear from the description whether there is room for individual support beyond what is offered or whether students can make their own requests. While the aim of the conversation with the student is a “consensus that is easy to understand”, for whom and why this consensus is needed and also to be “easy to understand” is not specified. Our interpretation is that consensus is a way of bringing the individual student and the structure and its support measures together.

In the focus group that consisted of special education teachers, the structures and students were also described as united through a dialogue with the student. The dialogue, which can be understood as a reflective guidance session, becomes important to creating an understanding of the student’s support needs – “that composite picture of them both, both background info and Anna’s,

Anna's own info". "Anna's own info" here refers to the information obtained directly from her during the individual conversations that the special education teachers conduct with all first-year students.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to identify how linguistic constructions of support and guidance for VET students with SEN are constructed in the dynamics between institutional ideas and the language use of VET staff. The data analysis revealed three different linguistic constructions or versions of support and guidance for students with SEN. The versions, which are author constructs, not only overlap but are also contradictory. When VET staff critically explored, reflected on and problematised existing practices, we identified tension emerging between established practices grounded in national regulations and their basic assumptions, values and beliefs. These tensions appear particularly in the first two constructions of support and guidance: a package of support measures and a structure falling apart.

In the version "a package of support measures", cognitive arguments dominate the linguistic constructions. These arguments relate to framing a necessary and structured process and a rational implementation of an effective support structure with different actors complementing each other, indicating that the idea of an effective system seeks legitimacy directly from policy documents. Although the actors involved in the support and guidance practices wish to convey a description of a comprehensive structure, there are flaws emerging in the processes. Compared to the holistic guidance model by Watts and Van Esbroeck (2000), seamless cooperation between actors with different tasks in the structure seems missing. The description of the "package" also reveals an underlying ideology related to neoliberalism and NPM, emphasising quality enhancement through effective resource use and clear process descriptions borrowed from industry, in which rationality and effectiveness are leading principles. Through systematic and structured work, the actors try to ensure adequate quality and equal procedures for the students. This rhetoric is dominant among leading VET staff, which is understandable as they are responsible for transforming policy documents into support structures. The focus on quality and structure may be rational, but if cognitive arguments and measurable rationality dominate, the individual human being risks becoming invisible in the processes (cf. Bornemark, 2018).

In "a package of support measures", there seems to be a very limited scope for questioning the institution's processes and structures. Any disruptions affecting the structure rest on the individual. Therefore, any problems and challenges risk being identified as and considered primarily the failures and responsibilities of the individual rather than the institution and/or structures (cf. Brunila et al., 2020). This view also means that support measures are deployed exclusively from the individual perspective (cf. medical/categorical) in special education (e.g., Emanuelsson et al., 2001). The normative idea behind this view of the student also touches on the neoliberal idea of the individual as an entrepreneur for themselves (Foucault, 2008), with the individual being his/her own capital that needs to be refined in an ongoing, rational, efficient, competitive and goal-oriented process, which in turn centres individual development. However, when students are expected to submit to the structure, preferably without resistance, another central aspect of neoliberalism is challenged – namely, the normative idea of the free human being (Foucault, 2008). Based on a normative neoliberal idea, students with SEN may even pose a risk (cf. Dean, 1999) to the ideals and norms of the ideal VET student as a future skilled worker. VET providers try to overcome this contradiction by creating professionally legitimised support structures that facilitate a smooth journey for all students. From the VET providers' perspective, this is rational and effective and not only a guarantee of supporting the student but also a move towards ensuring a skilled workforce, or at least a good citizen, even if it may mean subordination for the individual student.

While the idea of the "support package" emphasises a structure in which the student seems to be an object for various support measures, another construction, "the homelike environment", rests on

the notion that the learning environment plays a part in preventing and dealing with study challenges. This construction appears as an alternative version in the construction of a “structure falling apart”, challenging the structure that is described as malfunctioning. This proposal seems to reflect a countermove directed against the structure’s requirements for both teachers and students as neoliberalism and NPM are toned down in favour of humanistic values. The description recalls a focus on teacher–student relationships and, from a special educational point of view, a relational perspective (Emanuelsson et al., 2001). We assume that the homelike environment brings opportunities for direct support and communality, an aspect that Niemi and Jahnukainen (2019) find important for both teachers and students in Finnish VET. We understand the role of the teacher in the homelike environment as one of caring for the student. In the findings, several examples emerged of teachers who wanted to include students with SEN in instruction and guidance. In some descriptions, the inability to cope fully with this task due to a lack of resources is constructed as a failure. Our interpretation is that this normative idea of the ideal teacher is strong among teachers, although the neoliberal ideology, which we perceive as strong in policy documents and among leading staff, does not support this role. The consequence is a clash between the teachers’ ideals and the requirements of the institutional policy-driven structure.

A strong focus on a student-centred homelike environment also includes risks. One consequence might be that the support needs of the students are treated unequally as there are no commonly agreed-upon guidelines on how to deliver support. An opposite consequence might involve a denial of an individual’s special educational needs. In both cases, the student’s right to support is not guaranteed. This version also lacks mention of collaboration between actors to plan and execute support measures.

From tensions to common ground

As Granberg and Ohlsson (2018) observe, the problem with the management structures of NPM is not the structures themselves but the distance that they often create in relation to the human being. There are clear process descriptions regarding support structures in Finnish VET that are close to the ideals of NPM. However, the VET providers and staff working in VET institutions interpret and shape the guidelines when transforming policy into practice. The results indicate that the VET staff may need to ensure that the individual student is not lost in a rigid system but receives the opportunity to influence the decisions that concern themselves. This applies within the area now studied, but also within the reformed, individualized and customer-oriented VET in general. Dialogues and guidance sessions between staff and students that take a holistic view of the student can act as bridge builders, connecting the needs of individual students and the institution’s support provision structures in the decision-making processes. To accomplish a culture of dialogue, collaboration is essential. Furthermore, collaboration is often highlighted as a prerequisite for offering support in inclusive education (e.g., Ainscow, 2016) and is important in the holistic guidance model by Watts and Van Esbroeck (2000). To provide holistic guidance to the student, collaboration likely requires more than passing the student on to the next actor. A consensus between different actors on, for example, what support and guidance are and how they should be organised could be a key starting point for collaboration in which educational actors genuinely work together.

Our results point to the need for a balance between commonly agreed-upon structures and processes and the opportunities of staff that work with the student on daily basis to plan and execute holistic support measures. The results also seem to support the idea of a common vision and self-critique, as well as a readiness to involve the whole staff in development activities that have the potential to foster change. Change is a dynamic process by which ideas, developed and conveyed by reflective and sentient agents in discursive interaction, inform policy-oriented actions, which in turn serve to alter (or maintain) institutions – in our case, Finnish VET institutions (cf. Schmidt, 2008, 2012). The utmost goal must be to bring about change, which ensures that all students, regardless of their abilities, receive the support they are entitled to according to policy guidelines.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. The data come from one VET provider, which means that this particular provider's structures, culture and dominant discourses permeate the data. In this study, we have chosen to focus on linguistic constructions of the investigated phenomenon. While this particular focus may be seen as a limitation, it gives us the opportunity to become immersed in the different versions of the phenomenon that appear in our results. We gained a comprehensive staff perspective, which observations, for example, would not have allowed. However, observations of support and guidance practices could be carried out in further research, as could studies that include students' voices.

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