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Governing students for work and for life - guidance for students with special educational needs in Finnish VET

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ABSTRACT

Guidance has gained an increasingly important role in education. In this study, guidance for students with special educational needs within competence-based and customer-oriented, Finnish vocational education and training (VET) is examined from a governance perspective. Data were collected via focus group discussions among different categories of staff at one VET provider. A close-to-text analysis of the data was then performed followed by an investigation based on the Foucauldian key concepts, governmentality and power. Three versions of guidance were identified. In the first version, students are regarded as active and self-governing people, whose own motives and interest in education need to be identified and taken into account. In the second version, students are described as having difficulties in carrying out their studies and are given a passive role and exposed to objectifying governance by means of disciplinary power. In the third version, students are assumed to have a great need for support and are subject to a thorough, yet subtle, governance by means of pastoral power. The results are discussed with a focus on student categorisation and subject positions.

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Introduction

During recent decades, many countries' vocational education and training (VET) systems have been subject to reforms that are aimed at improving quality, economic growth and competitiveness in a globalised world (Avis 2012; Esmond and Atkins 2022; Riga Conclusions 2015). Several researchers (Down, Smyth, and Robinson 2019; Hardy et al. 2020; Niemi and Jahnukainen 2019) have pointed out that these reforms have distinct references to neoliberal values, such as measurement, accountability, marketisation, customer orientation, individual competence and freedom of choice. Nordic welfare states, including Finland, have not been immune to these international trends

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(Jørgensen, Järvinen, and Lundahl 2019). Although Finnish basic education has managed to maintain a relatively well-functioning comprehensive school system that combines academic performance and equality (Kiilakoski and Oravakangas 2010), neoliberal values and ideas about new public management have influenced Finnish VET (Rosenblad, Schaffar, and Löfström 2022; Uljens, Wolff, and Frontini 2016). The reform launched in 2018 marked a sharp turn towards neoliberalism, emphasising customer orientation, individual choice, flexible study paths, and recognition of earlier acquired skills and competences (AVET 2017; Rintala and Nokelainen 2020; Rosenblad, Schaffar, and Löfström 2022).

VET is part of the upper secondary school system in Finland, comprising the academically profiled general upper secondary (GUS) and VET. After completing basic education, Finnish students are more or less obliged to choose either GUS or VET, as education is mandatory until a person reaches the age of 18 or receives an upper secondary qualification. Most students choose GUS, but VET is a rather popular track, attracting more than 40% of basic education leavers (Statistics Finland 2023). The different profiles of GUS and VET entail that less academically motivated students, students from migrant backgrounds and students with special educational needs (SEN) tend to choose or are guided to choose VET (Kauppila, Lappalainen, and Mietola 2021; Niemi and Laaksonen 2020). Thus, student diversity is greater in VET than in GUS. Although the main objective of VET is to educate a skilled workforce, Jørgensen (2018) gives VET an additional responsibility: to support disadvantaged young persons, who for various reasons, e.g. SEN, encounter barriers to learning and are at risk of dropping out from VET. However, this dual responsibility causes VET systems to balance between promoting equality and social inclusion and providing the labour market with skilled employees (Ryökynen and Raudasoja 2022). Although Finnish VET has a long tradition of supporting students with SEN in the mainstream with established support practices such as special education (Niemi 2015), research findings (Niemi and Jahnukainen 2019; Rosenblad, Schaffar, and Löfström 2022) indicate that the most recent VET reform, with its focus on individual responsibility and self-governing, conflicts students' and educators' wishes for support and communality. Students who encounter barriers to learning are in a difficult position in their studies if the VET systems do not sufficiently support their learning and well-being (Björk-Åman and Ström 2022). In this article, we attempt to highlight a phenomenon related to support systems in VET, namely, guidance. Consistent with the Finnish VET legislation (AVET 2017), we consider guidance a broad and general term that covers learning at school via educational guidance and on-the-job learning via workplace guidance as well as promoting career choices and professional growth via career guidance. According to Juutilainen and Rätty (2017), guidance in Finnish VET has a holistic character, also including guidance for the student's personal development. The holistic character is stressed in the Finnish policy documents, which point out that guidance on

a general level should take into account the student's overall situation (FNAE 2023). All VET students are entitled to guidance. According to the AVET (2017), they have a right to receive guidance that enables the acquisition of vocational competences and supports the students' growth into decent and educated members of society. In addition to the guidance to which all VET students are entitled, students with SEN are entitled to long-term or consistent special support that is received on a regular basis, which is offered in mainstream institutions in which most Finnish VET students with SEN are enrolled. For students with severe learning difficulties, serious disabilities or illnesses who require extensive, long-term and multi-professional support, intensive special support is available, mostly provided in a few special schools and/or special classes that are qualified to offer this kind of support. Students' individual study paths as well as their need for guidance and support are documented in the personal competence development plan designed for each student attending FNAE (2021). While policy documents exemplify the possibility of special support measures and intensive special support measures (educational adaptations, learning aids, special equipment, study skills practices and educational assistance), they regulate neither content nor implementation of guidance (FNAE 2021). Hence, VET providers are responsible for creating functioning guidance measures and structures.

Research on guidance in VET is extensive, focusing mostly on workplace guidance and career guidance. Studies on educational guidance, especially that target educational guidance for students with SEN, are sparse. However, available studies (e.g. Björk-Åman and Ström 2022; Rosenblad, Schaffar, and Löfström 2022) conclude that the emphasis on self-governing and well-performing students, may disadvantage students with learning challenges such as SEN and, in the worst case, treating them as second-class students and depriving them of opportunities for coping and improving in education and life. The ambition of the current article is to advance knowledge of guidance for students who need special educational support. We conceptualise guidance as a discursive practice and approach the object of study using the concept of governmentality (Foucault 2003). The term discursive practice refers to a specific set of rules for organising and producing different forms of knowledge, based on historical and cultural course of events. Thus, discursive practices produce certain types of discourse (Foucault 1989), in our case a discussion about guidance for students with SEN. Governmentality (Foucault 2000) refers to the complex net of subtle power mechanisms that modern societies exert on its citizens. These mechanisms of 'soft power' shape the reality in which individuals in a certain context, e.g. guidance practices, are free to act (Foucault 2000). The purpose of the current study is thus to investigate guidance for SEN students from a governance perspective. The research questions that we address are presented as follows:

- What versions of guidance can be identified within the discursive practice of guidance for SEN students?

- What type of governance do these versions imply?

Guidance as governance

Guidance implies different objectives for the individual and society as a whole. On the European Union (EU) policy level (Riga Conclusions 2015; Vuorinen and Virolainen 2017), guidance is a key element in ensuring a highly skilled workforce through high-quality VET, emphasising skills enhancement, quality assurance and continuing training. From an individual's perspective, guidance relates closely to supporting individuals in lifelong learning, as well as promoting their competence development (Rinne and Raudasoja 2022; Watts and Van Esbroeck 2000). Guidance has thus a societal as well as an individual impact, promoting productivity, competitiveness and economic growth in a globalised world and supporting, and even urging, individuals to make appropriate skills-promoting educational and career choices to enable a smooth transition from education to working life (Psifidou, Mouratoglou, and Farazouli 2021).

The EU policy level changes have impacted national strategies. In recent decades, Finnish policy initiatives and strategies have clearly highlighted the need for measures that offer young people with opportunities to reach individual and societal goals. Harjula, Kalalahti, and Varjo (2021) analysed Finnish policy documents on guidance and found three overarching rationalities related to guidance: guidance for the knowledge-based society, guidance for lifelong learning and guidance for social justice. These rationalities relate to the assumption that guidance is part of a system aimed at high productivity on the societal level and employability on the individual level.

This dual function of guidance also relates to one of the main strategic priorities in Finnish youth policy, namely, measures for preventing dropout from VET, especially regarding 'vulnerable young people' at risk of social exclusion (Mertanen, Pashby, and Brunila 2020). The assumption is that guidance prevents marginalisation and offers opportunities for young people to become productive citizens in a globalised world. However, to navigate in a flexible VET system puts demands on young people, especially on those who face different kinds of challenges. This claim aligns with Virolainen and Stenström (2015), who found that increased individual opportunities and freedom of choice has paradoxically increased the demand for guidance. Moreover, the neoliberal orientation with its focus on accountability, measurement and individual choice drives guidance in a technical-managerialist direction (Rosenblad, Schaffar, and Löfström 2022). The focus is no longer necessarily on the students' needs but rather on documentation.

To foster the ideal of the productive and employable citizen, it is necessary from the system's perspective to govern young persons, especially those 'at risk' (e.g. individuals with SEN) in a certain direction. Several researchers (Lange and

Alexiadou 2010; Mertanen, Pashby, and Brunila 2020) claim that such governing can take many forms, from governing via international and national control mechanisms (e.g. VET legislation and policy documents) to 'soft policies' (e.g. best practices, quality standards and measurable units such as competence points).

The ultimate governing mechanism is however self-governing, which seems to be the ideal in neoliberal rationality (Rose 1999). The self-governing individual within, for example, VET, is free to choose from a range of available options, not between any options, as some options are more desirable from the system's point of view (Dean 2010). Thus, guidance within VET is conceptualised as a governing mechanism operating at a distance, shaping the students aspirations in an illusion of freedom (Fejes and Dahlstedt 2013; Romito 2019). This notion of freedom functions as both an instrument for and as an effect of governing, meaning governing of others and governing of oneself (Foucault 1982). Governing of others is aimed at steering individuals and organisations towards political objectives, while self-governing refers to individuals' responsibility to acquire such knowledge about themselves, which enables individuals to stay productive, embrace life-long learning and manage uncertainty in a rapidly changing world (Fejes 2008; Hautz 2020).

Governmentality is essentially about exercising power. Foucault (1978, 2003) identifies several forms of power: disciplinary power targeting the individual, biopower targeting the whole population and pastoral power caring for the individual by guiding individuals to well-being, health and safety, that is, the good life. A prerequisite for the usage of soft power, such as the pastoral power, is knowledge of the innermost secrets of an individual – a type of confession (Foucault 1978). The confession is the practice of shaping desirable subjectivity in a linguistic process during which the confessing individual reveals his or her authentic self (Avelino 2015; Fejes 2008). The individual 'is enfolded in power as he or she becomes subject to the authoritative discourse of the confessor' (Fejes 2008, 656). In a guidance situation, the 'confessing individual' not only reflects with the counsellor but also receives encouragement to engage in a reflective dialogue with him- or herself to foster self-knowledge and discover his or her interests. Reflection and self-scrutiny combined with confession as a part of educational guidance make us confessors and thereby give us the ability to govern ourselves (Fejes 2008).

Method

The empirical data employed in this study were collected as part of the project Right to Learn – Skills to Teach (HAMK n.d.). This Finnish, nationwide project was aimed at developing support systems and multi-professional guidance in teacher education for upper secondary school.

In the current study, focus group interviews were utilised as the data collection method. Focus group interviews offer the opportunity for relatively natural discussions (Cyr 2019), which in relation to the purpose of the study were considered crucial. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were held virtually in the spring of 2020. During the interviews, both researchers were present and acted as moderators but tried to take a passive role to avoid interfering in the discussions. The researchers introduced the discussion topics by sharing a PowerPoint presentation containing a stimulus material with the group members. The stimulus material 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 during the study time). To obtain a more practical connection in the discussions, a fictitious student Anna, who is in need of support in her studies, was introduced.

The focus groups consisted of staff from one Finnish VET provider, which is a semi-large actor offering versatile study programmes that provide both special support and intensive special support. Cooperation with this particular VET provider had already been established within the project. Twelve focus groups participated in the focus group interviews for a total of 54 participants (3–6 persons per group). The participants were selected in collaboration with leading staff at the VET provider. The groups were formed according to the VET provider's organisational model so that each group consisted of personnel who worked with similar tasks and/or at similar positions in the organisation. Most groups included all personnel within the sector in question and required no selection. In the groups with many available personnel (vocational and general subject teachers), the selection criterion was that the groups should be as heterogeneous as possible, with respect to gender, age, field and teaching experience. The leading staff were involved in this selection process, and a certain strategic selection may have occurred. In most cases, initial contact with the participants was made by telephone, followed by an email with a more detailed description of the study. All participants gave their consent to participate in the study.

The participating groups consisted of

- senior staff with leading positions (two groups),
- VET teachers, most of whom also served as personal supervisors for a student group (two groups),
- teachers teaching general subjects (one group),
- special education teachers working mainly with special support (one group)
- counsellors, supervisors and coordinators (three groups)
- special education teachers working with intensive special support (two groups)

- counsellors and coordinators working with intensive special support (one group)

Each focus group participated in one interview. The sessions lasted on average for 1.5 hours and were, with the consent of the participants, video-recorded to enable subsequent transcription. Two research assistants carried out the transcription, while one researcher (the first author) had the main responsibility for the analysis. The data consist of 167 transcribed pages.

The first step in the analysis consisted of identifying sequences in the data with content that was relevant to the purpose of the study. The identified sequences were then divided into the following themes with associated, partially overlapping categories: Theme 1. Form of the guidance (categories: active, personal, dialogue, passive, teacher-led activity), Theme 2. Content and function of the guidance (categories: guidance for learning, guidance to manoeuvre in the educational environment, guidance to manage life). In the following step, the focus shifted to the discourse analytically relevant question: how did the members of the groups talk about the identified themes and categories? To capture the aspect of *how*, we performed a close-to-text analysis (Potter 1996; Wetherell and Potter 1992). In the analysis, we examined the purpose of the descriptions of guidance and the guidance-related topics of the focus group discussions and the rhetorical moves used to make the descriptions trustworthy. How were the descriptions constructed to withstand counterarguments and to pursue the listener by the selected rhetorical choices? When the how-question was taken into account, some of the previous categories were merged and reorganised into the three versions of guidance for students with SEN presented in the results. The performed analysis was aimed at answering the first research question. We consider these three versions as versions within the discursive practice of guidance for students with SEN, not as representations of different guidance discourses.

In the second step of the analysis process, we investigated the results of the initial analysis through two Foucauldian key concepts – governmentality and power –. to answer the second research question. These theoretical concepts constitute the study's theoretical starting point but are also employed as analytical tools. In this phase, we addressed the following overall question: in what way is guidance used to govern the individual student?

Trustworthiness and ethics

Through a discourse analytical study, the researchers never claim to present the objective, generalisable truth. In our study, we show how a phenomenon can be described in different ways and how these ways of examining the phenomenon can have different consequences. The systematic work that we present in our methods chapter still gives us reason to claim that the

versions we present are to be regarded as a valid and valuable research contribution. As discourse analytical researchers, we nevertheless function as co-constructors in our research project, and the linguistic constructions derived from our analysis must be considered flexible designs that both complement and intersect.

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.

Results

Three different versions of guidance were identified in the close-to-text analysis. The versions were investigated further using Foucault's concepts of governmentality and power:

- Guidance as an active, personal dialogue with subtle governing
- Guidance as a teacher-led activity with disciplinary governing
- Guidance as a life-skills-promoting activity with pastoral governing

Guidance as an active, personal dialogue with subtle governing

When the focus group members discussed what, on a more general level, distinguishes guidance from teaching, a version that focuses on *guidance as a mutually active, personal dialogue mostly addressed to one person* emerged: 'I see it [guidance] as a much more active process for the participants' 'and more as a joint process as well'. Guidance is, in this version, also described as involving a *closer and more personal relationship* with the student in comparison to teaching.

In the discussions that more specifically addressed guidance for students with SEN, the need for a plan 'that is based a lot on what motivates students themselves, for example, identifying the units that they are perhaps most passionate about so that the studies does not become overwhelming' is mentioned. In guidance, the individual's interests and strengths are sought. A combination of personal interests, strengths and freedom to choose, which is a fundamental part of liberalism and neoliberalism thinking, is assumed to guarantee a good outcome – in this case, students who complete their education. A basis for this version of guidance is that the students have good self-awareness and a willingness to share information about themselves, a sort of confession which can be understood as an important step in both the authentication of the subject and self-governance (Avelino 2015; Fejes 2008).

In several of the focus groups, guidance for the category of students with SEN is described as a question of quantity rather than quality. Students with SEN need *more* (individual) *guidance*, *more frequent follow-up* regarding different tasks and *more time*.

I think that with Anna [example student] you would perhaps have guidance alone but with the others you can have several students. That you get to move at Anna's pace and discuss whether she understands how she's going to do this and why?

In this version, students with SEN are assumed to work at a slower pace and have a more difficult time understanding what to do, which legitimises the approach. This assumption partly contradicts the earlier ideal of freedom of choice since students with SEN seem to be subject to more intensive control than students in general. This finding is, on the other hand, logical because students with SEN, in accordance with Foucault's 1978 thinking on biopolitics and biopower, even may pose a risk to society (cf. Dean 2010). However, in an opposite version, guidance for students with SEN is described as 'nothing special' but 'ordinary'. This way of thinking is based on the instruction arranged and adapted to the students' ability so that the guidance itself does not deviate from that given to other students: '... you build up these tasks in the way that a student... they get to work with stuff like that and eventually you can build on more complex tasks that they can handle'. By the teacher taking responsibility for building tasks at the appropriate level, students' opportunities to work independently are promoted, which means that a 'special' need for guidance can be avoided. Such a version of guidance implies that intensified governing in the form of guidance is not imposed on students with SEN but that students are allowed to independently work to the same extent as other students by individually adapted tasks.

Guidance is in this version considered a natural part of modern education, a soft and subtle governmental strategy that offers students the possibility to exercise their freedom within the educational system. By seeing the human behind the student (and hopefully future worker) the individual's human capital can be investigated and strengthened (cf. Foucault 1987). According to this way of thinking, each person becomes an entrepreneur. The entrepreneur is their own capital, a producer of themselves and the source of their income. A built-in goal in guidance is therefore to develop one's own value.

Guidance as a teacher-led activity with disciplinary governing

The previous version, guidance as an active, personal dialogue, is overall a dominant version in the data. Especially in the focus group discussions among teachers, a contrasting version of guidance could be identified, a version where the students are more or less objectified and given a passive role. The students are guided 'further' or 'into the system'. 'Pushing' and

‘steering’ are ways of constructing the activity carried out in the version where guidance is *a teacher-led activity*. Guidance seems to fulfil a pragmatic function in this version, getting the student to do the right things and in the right way ‘to somehow steer up so that something gets done at all’, without the student contributing their own thoughts or perspectives. This idea is also pointed out by some of the focus group participants: ‘It’s not like, it doesn’t leave much room for their [the students’] own thoughts and their own philosophies...’ and ‘It’s like you take someone by the hand and tell them now you are going to stand here...’

In the following excerpt, guidance is described as a tool to support the students’ progress in their studies by ensuring that they complete all required tasks, which can mean an ‘extra kick in the butt’.

I think of this particular category of student who kind of doesn’t get started to do the tasks. The studies must have begun and need to continue for a while before you can put your finger on the students who may need an extra kick in the butt. Students who do not have learning difficulties but who still do not get anything independently done need a lot of guidance to complete tasks.

The tone in this excerpt is clearly different from that of the initially presented version of guidance. The language is more mundane and less correct from a professional perspective. Börjesson and Palmblad (2008) suggest that commuting between different types of language use, for example, between descriptions that are politically correct and more mundane, can function as credibility-creating. The guidance does not, in this version, seem to be based on students’ interests and needs, the goal is not necessarily to promote self-development and self-regulation. Rather, as more or less passive recipients adapt students to the educational system’s need for conformity, where completed tasks can be assumed to represent successful studies. There seems to be no need to get to know students and their passions. The reason behind the undone tasks is irrelevant and the problem does not seem to be preventable. The challenges in the studies are clearly set at the individual student level. It is not the tasks that need to be adapted nor the time that needs to be extended, but students need to be supported in complying with the requirements of the system.

In this version, guidance is not provided using subtle techniques but by more distinct approaches that we locate within the techniques of disciplinary power. In the terminology of disciplinary power, tasks being completed can be understood as a type of examination in which a student who cannot manage can be considered one who failed. According to Foucault (1987), an examination should not be understood as obtaining a degree but rather a part that underpins the learning with a constant ritual of power. The examination functions as a ceremony of objectification, and students are trapped by the examination in that they probably cannot obtain proof of their knowledge, a degree, without first having passed all these minor exams along the way.

In the examination, the means of disciplinary power are combined: surveillance, reward and punishment (Foucault 1987). According to the description, the students who need a kick in the butt do not discuss their need for support in their studies but seem to be identified by the staff in a process that could be interpreted as surveillance: 'the studies must have begun and need to continue for a while before you can put your finger on the students ... '. Punishment and reward are parts of a dual system in which reward is preferred over punishment. Although with a well-intentioned purpose, we interpret, for example, kicks in the butt as a form of punishment. The purpose of both punishment and reward is to normalise. In the norm's punishment system, achievements and behaviour are weighed on the good-bad scale, which results in a hierarchy of relatively good and bad individuals. Knowledge of the student, rewards and punishments form an integrated whole, in which the student's 'correct weight' is highlighted (Foucault 1987, 182).

Guidance as a life-skills-promoting activity with pastoral governing

In a third version, guidance is given a large role to support students in their psychological well-being and to manage their life: 'we have a lot of guidance, so to speak, for life, i.e. how they should manage their life in general.' It can be about guidance for 'key competences' but also about meeting 'special needs for guidance very much around self-esteem and social relationships' such as 'envy and jealous boyfriends and friends and quarrels that they are not able to handle on their own'. Getting to know and meeting students where they are as well as providing guidance based on individual needs is emphasised in this version.

We are very careful that everyone feels seen, that they are allowed to be themselves and that they are sort of accepted for who they are. Then, it is also the case that we are quite quick to catch up on absences.

This version of guidance is mainly used by the staff providing intensive special support, in which the student's need for support and the available resources can be assumed to be greater than within special support. Guidance seems to be very comprehensive and includes both student's studies and private life. Guidance is central to creating a sense of security for the student and possibly also functions as a buffer against discomfort and failure. Guidance is based on knowledge about students and their challenges since the staff seem to have insight into what the students can and cannot 'handle on their own'. The student's own share in the guidance is somewhat ambiguous. In the descriptions within this version, it appears that the staff perceive that their students need a lot of guidance due to their special needs and are happy to assume this responsibility.

Consequently it is extremely frustrating for the staff when students refuse guidance:

...it creates so much frustration and thought and we would like to help. It creates a lot of reflection, so I really like challenges... It's almost like you take it on yourself a little too, that this is actually a lot of work. You try everything you can, but at the same time, you also start to question yourself because he has his diagnoses and challenges, this is part of them. How much can we even hold on, and when do we have to take a step back when he doesn't want to accept any help?

The feeling described in the excerpt is almost a sense of hopelessness when the student refuses to receive the guidance that the staff assumes he badly needs. In the statement, we can identify a concern for the individual that almost goes beyond the individual's right to self-determination. It is about a governance that is based on care and benevolence towards the governed. Our interpretation is that, using Foucault's 2003 terminology, we are addressing the soft pastoral power. The direction of pastoral power is the norm, but this form of power has its basis in a concern for the weak with the goal of leading fellow human beings to the good life (Dean 2010). The descriptions within the version show that comprehensive control is at stake. Even a student's private life becomes the target of guidance measures, which entails the risk that extensive care and protection limit the student's opportunities to practise their own ability to self-government and human growth. This care can thus be limiting and even depriving of freedom. It seems that students who need intensive special support are under significantly greater surveillance than other students and have significantly more staff contacts.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate guidance for SEN students from a governance perspective. The results of the study reveal how more or less subtle power techniques are employed within the discursive practice of guidance for students with SEN. Based on our purpose of the study and the chosen perspective, we find it important to recall a central claim by Foucault – power is not owned by anyone but is embedded in relationships among people and produces individuals (Foucault 1980). According to Davies and Harré (1990), a fundamental force of a discursive practice is the provision of subject positions. In the results of this study, we have presented different versions of guidance for SEN students and considered these versions from a governance perspective. In the following section, we discuss the results in relation to possible consequences for the student subject. Using the versions of guidance we identify in our data, we also glimpse three different categories of SEN students that through guidance are treated in different ways. The categorisation of a student brings with it different forms of governing, but our assumption is

that different forms of governing also bring about different forms of subject positions.

In the first version of guidance for SEN, we identify a category of students that due to SEN need extra individual guidance but for whom staff still offer the possibility of functioning as a self-governing subject. The emphasis on guidance starting from the student's own interests and even passions invites these students to influence their own studies. The student is given the status of a subject in their life. There is a belief in the student's ability to make choices that is favourable to themselves. The students are admittedly subject to an expanded guidance and control. This control and governing is nevertheless primarily aimed at the students' studies. Niemi and Jahnukainen (2019) point out that the focus on self-governing in contemporary Finnish VET does not offer a good learning environment for all young people. During a guidance session, students are given support, but there is a risk that daily support is lacking in school since one purpose of this type of guidance is to realise an individual study path in which self-governing is central. The notion that the guidance is considered successful is based on the students' willingness to share their passions and interests, which requires a substantial amount of self-awareness as well as good communication skills.

Whereas for the student category in the first version, the student has the right (and obligation) to speak and be heard, this is not the case concerning the student category in the second version, in which the student is the object of disciplinary power. Norms seem to exist on many different levels. The students who does not reach the standard for students in VET are instead assigned to another normative level, namely, the standard for students in VET with SEN. These students that are assumed to need to be clearly steered and perhaps even receive a kick in the butt, do not necessarily have learning difficulties, which would at least place them within the norm for students with SEN. They are guilty of an inability to communicate their needs, which also falls outside desirable behaviour and norms in a society where a connection can be identified between being a good communicator and a good person (cf. Cameron 2000). Overall, these students belong to a category that is located at such a distance to the norm that tougher governing seem to be justified. Categorisation per se can be considered an act of power, and at this stage we want to highlight two risks of categorisation. The first risk is that the individual is easily assigned characteristics that do not really match the person in question (Börjesson and Palmblad 2008). The second risk is that categorisation also includes the risk of a person being reduced to a category. Stigma is Goffman's (1990) well-known term for categorisation that devalues the individual, limits our perception of a human being as a whole person and makes us focus only on the stigma. The lack of communicating their needs, which is described as a characteristic of the students in question, can also possibly be considered a consequence of stigmatisation. Paradoxically, the ambition that these students should develop their ability

to function as a self-governing subject does not seem to be built into guidance/governing, even though self-governing is explicitly a lack. The students are considered needing direct guidance to getting things done and progress in their studies. As individuals with passions and interests, they are rather uninteresting.

A third category of SEN students consists of students that are considered having such great support needs that their whole life becomes subject to governance by the soft pastoral power. This type of guidance can be considered a type of guidance for development on a personal level (Juutilainen and Rätty 2017). Governance by pastoral power is rooted in a comprehensive knowledge of the student, which can also mean an adaptation according to the student's development. In the descriptions in our data, we can see that pastoral power may require a deep insight into both the student's personal characteristics and life events. The pastoral power is based on a concern for the individual, but we can also see that it entails risk that this great concern for students deprives them of the opportunity to develop their self-governance and self-regulation. The governance is more comprehensive than what is associated with guidance in an educational context. In a study by Kauppila, Lappalainen, and Mietola (2021, 1164), the authors describe how students with severe learning disabilities in post-compulsory education seem to accept the path that is set out for them as 'subjects for existing disability services' but that there also is a distinct resistance among some of the students to the subject offer. In our study, no actual student perspective is included, however a description of a student who resists the guidance that is deemed necessary is provided. The staff reluctantly see themselves forced to accept the student's wish. While we can see a governance in the direction of the skilled, responsible worker/employee in the two initial versions with associated governmentality and categorisation, the objective is more ambivalent in the last version. Possibly, these students are considered having such great challenges that they do not have the capacity to reach the ideals of a neoliberal society.

All of the identified versions are aimed at helping students manoeuvre in the educational context and its system, and sometimes beyond that, given that the guidance also includes the student's private life. However, whether the guidance is used as a way to gain deeper insight into tailored individual solutions on how education can be reshaped to better suit the student is not well understood (cf. Björk-Åman and Ström 2022). In accordance with Brunila (2013), it seems to be risky that problems, resources and solutions are sought first and foremost in the individual through guidance and not in the educational environment. Overall, there is no strong resistance or questioning of guidance as a phenomenon in the focus group discussions. The notion that guidance is needed is taken for granted; it is regarded as an unavoidable and necessary part of modern education. This premise is understandable because guidance is emphasised in the policy documents but simultaneously worrisome because

individual guidance should in no way be regarded as an uncomplicated phenomenon, especially not when it is aimed at students who can be considered vulnerable. Through guidance, students are expected to find their place in the system, to become someone who makes realistic plans and systematically strives to achieve them, i.e. a docile citizen of a neoliberal society. In one of the versions, however, the dominant discourse is slightly challenged in that adaptations of instruction and the learning environment entail that at least 'extra' guidance can be avoided. In such an environment, all students can function as self-governing subjects, according to their ability, in the educational context.

Conclusions, limitations and future directions

From a governance perspective, the discursively constructed versions of guidance presented in this study indicate that guidance for students with SEN is a complex phenomenon. The VET staff construct and deconstruct guidance in the space between legislative and institutional norms and their freedom to act, thus providing opportunities for their students. However, the versions of guidance show that the categorisation of students developed by the staff may limit these opportunities. The VET staff is thus using their freedom not only to provide possibilities but also to exert power. This argument indicates that guidance within VET is part of a neoliberal rationality that operates via several forms of power mechanisms (cf. Björk-Åman and Ström 2022).

The current study provides a staff perspective on guidance. In this respect, the perspective is limited. Furthermore, the chosen design relies on a second-order perspective, as we do not know what is really happening in the guidance sessions. To gain a comprehensive picture of guidance for students with SEN, an ethnographic study observing guidance sessions for students receiving special as well as intensive special support would be an option. Another topic worthy of investigation is career and workplace guidance for VET students with SEN.

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