Finnish VET representatives' interpretations of inclusion

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to learn about Finnish VET representatives' perceptions of inclusion. Discussions and research on inclusion in education have mainly concentrated on the comprehensive school context, although vocational education and training (VET) students may have multiple, intersectional experiences of disadvantage. Our data included representatives (N=53) from five different Finnish VET sectors. Through semi-structured interviews, we investigated their interpretations of inclusion. We applied an abductive approach in our analytical process that followed the principles of qualitative content analysis. Our findings indicated that the definition of inclusion is ambiguous. At the administration level, inclusion was related to ideology, whereas teachers spoke about special education practices. Work-life representatives connected inclusion to the principles of communality, and students appreciated this understanding and individual solutions in their studying and workplace learning. This study supports the view of earlier studies and addresses a need for shared understanding and values to engage with inclusion in practice. The VET sector would benefit from discussions and training in inclusion and inclusive principles, where the study works as an initiator.

Keywords: inclusion, equality, equity, vocational education and training, special support

Introduction

Through the ages, inclusion in education has had different interpretations in its practical implementations and as a research field (Florian, 2014; Reindal, 2015). Since 1994 and the Salamanca statement, there has been an international commitment to inclusive education (UNESCO, 1994). The commitment has marked a significant shift in thinking about inclusive education: inclusive education has evolved from a narrative of children with special needs to a narrative of inclusive schools and learning environments for all children (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). According to Göransson and Nilholm (2014), research on inclusion has been based on four different understandings of inclusive education: (1) inclusion as the placement of pupils with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, (2) inclusion as meeting the social/academic needs of pupils with disabilities, (3) inclusion as meeting the social/academic needs of all pupils and (4) inclusion as the creation of communities. Many recent studies on inclusion in Finnish basic education report about school improvement through special education and general education practices (e.g., Lintuvuori, 2019; Paju, 2021). Depending on municipalities' aims, the school improvement actions in Finland often represent integration and follow the principle of a less limiting environment and not the principles of real inclusion, which would mean a school for all (Jahnukainen, 2021; Lintuvuori, 2019; Paju, 2021). According to recent studies (Ebuenyi et al., 2020; Takala et al., 2020), inclusion should be understood in a way that everybody is fully entitled to study and participate in society and communities as full members despite illness, disorder, gender, language, culture, religion, wealth, skin colour or other factors.

In Finland, acts on equal opportunities (1986/609), and non-discrimination (1325/2014) create a solid basis for education providers and actors: Accessibility should be the premise in all learning, guiding and support, which means removing all obstacles and discriminatory practices in schools (Finlex Data Bank, 1986, 2014). Furthermore, the Finnish act (531/2017) on vocational education and training (VET) creates a central frame for vocational education. According to Paragraph 64§, students in vocational education and training are entitled to special support if they have severe learning difficulties, serious disabilities or illnesses requiring a customised, broad-based, and diverse form of special needs support (Finlex Data Bank, 2017). The means to meet the needs of students include the development of individual learning paths, individual pedagogical solutions and special teaching and learning arrangements. Finnish legislation permits, with certain conditions, a different treatment according to a person's characteristics like age, origin, or disability. This is defined as positive discrimination, which is intended by VET to support a student's competence acquisition in different learning environments with individually constructed means of support. First of all, achieving inclusion depends mostly on the agreement between teachers, other school personnel and work-life representatives, both in terms of having a shared

vision and on steps that must be taken to put the concept into practice (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2009).

Education has been a central part of the Nordic welfare system (Holm, 2018; Nylund & Rosvall, 2019). It has been regarded as a crucial instrument for social justice and security by providing schooling to all citizens (Lundahl, 2016; Stronks et al., 2016). Education is one of the most important factors constructing equality and equity in society, but education is also one of the main causes of inequality (OECD, 2012; Power, 2012). Educational equality is not uniform across school subjects and schools but socioeconomical and ethnical marginalisation interrelates with poorer school attachment and poorer academic performance (Beach & Sernhede, 2011; Ouakrim-Soivio et al., 2019). It seems that the standard of education is passing from generation to generation: Social background has a huge impact on person's educational success (Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist et al., 2020). Earlier studies have also revealed that to access and complete VET, refugees and asylum seekers are dependent on supporting measures to overcome the variety of barriers (Jørgensen et al., 2021). Most educational policies can be seen as attempts to make education less unequal, but the solutions made embody different assumptions about what counts as a socially just education system and the obstacles that prevent this from being realised. VET may have important inclusive functions in providing alternative learning careers for young people, supporting their study motivation and vocational identities (Larsen & Persson Thunqvist, 2018). The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) evaluated the provision of special needs support in vocational education and training in 2020–2021 (Goman et al., 2021). The report expressed ten development items where the importance of common understanding became explicit. The report recommended closer collaboration between personnel members to ensure sufficient special support practices. It emphasised the need for a common understanding of the practices for adapting the assessment of competence and making exceptions. The interfaces between the different levels and forms of support should be more explicit, and the multi-professional cooperation related to special support should be developed.

The increased need for a common understanding and shared responsibility creates a relevant starting point for this research. The study contributes to the national and international discussion of inclusive excellence of VET through discovering different representatives' (N=53) conceptions for inclusion. The purpose is to create an updated paradigm. Our research question is:

- How is inclusion interpreted by Finnish VET representatives?

The study applies a broad view on inclusion which means that it is not limited to people with special needs, but it includes the realisation of equality and equal opportunities for all in both education and society.

Inclusion in VET

Notably, the discussion and debate on inclusion in education have mainly concentrated on the comprehensive school context although VET students may have multiple, intersectional experiences of disadvantage (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2021). Our recent study (Raudasoja & Ryökkynen, n.d.) indicated that students of professional teacher education defined inclusion as teachers' pedagogical special practices and described it only in the comprehensive school context. Also, studies on special needs education in VET in the context of Nordic countries have mainly concentrated on practice or the organisation level and not on the policy level (Björk-Åhman et al., 2021). One perspective of the importance of a common understanding is presented in Vehkasalo's (2020) study on a large-scale dropout prevention programme in Finland during 2011–2014. Their results suggested that the implementation of school improvement programmes should be as uniform as possible to achieve better results. It is essential to deepen the common understanding and examine the inclusion atmosphere at Finnish VET because the goals of VET are directed to promoting opportunities for all and meeting salient social, economic, and personal purposes (Billett, 2014; Vuorinen & Virolainen, 2017). VET programmes are designed to deliver education that enables individuals to secure employment and provides possibilities for further studies (Karusaari, 2020; Scharnhorst & Kammermann, 2020; Weigel et al., 2007). Hence, the structural premise for VET—namely acts, statutes, student selection and qualification requirements—provide the VET system with an inclusive starting point, which is also the premise for this study.

VET has often been characterised as being for the more disadvantaged members of society (e.g., Herranen & Souto, 2016). Most of the Finnish pupils who receive special support for their studies at comprehensive school continue their upper secondary studies at vocational colleges (Herranen & Souto, 2016; Niemi, 2015). This is obvious because students in VET are entitled to special support if they have severe learning difficulties, serious disabilities, or illnesses, which means that they require a customised, broad-based and diverse form of special needs support (Act on VET, 531/2017). The means to meet the needs of any student include the development of individual learning paths, individual pedagogical solutions and special teaching and learning arrangements.

The VET system balances between being a part of a school for all and providing the labour market with skilled employees (Goman et al., 2021; Jørgensen et al., 2021). In Finland, the education level is high, which has been acknowledged also in the labour market: The attachment to work life without a qualification is challenging (Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist et al., 2020; Schmid, 2020). The reform of Finnish vocational education and training at the beginning of 2018 has increased flexibility in terms of access and completion. The consequential change has been from the system-based approach to a competence-based approach through which

the personal study paths, broad-based competence and close cooperation with labour markets are core concerns. Individualisation can specifically benefit those students who can manage individually; but then again, it might marginalise those who need more support and guidance for their studies (Ryökkynen et al., 2020; Ryökkynen et al., 2022). This is significant because VET programmes are designed to deliver education that enables individuals to secure employment and provides possibilities for further studies (Jørgensen et al., 2018; Scharnhorst & Kammermann, 2020; Weigel et al., 2007). The goals of VET are directed to promoting opportunities for all and to meeting salient social, economic, and personal purposes (Billett, 2014). Finding one's unique self is complex, specifically for students and workers with special needs who seem to be delimited by learning challenges and workplace exclusion (Barnes & Mercer, 2005). Stenfert Kroese et al. (2013) argue that even with support to mitigate discrimination, workers with disabilities are more likely to experience poverty, poor housing, short periods of employment, unemployment, social exclusion, abuse, and overt discrimination. VET is critical for many workers but particularly for diverse cohorts of workers, such as those with a disability (Cavanagh et al., 2019). Access to Finnish VET for all should refer not only to education as a service that is free for everyone but also to the opportunity to take advantage of it. That is, everyone should be able to experience the personal benefits of acquiring high-quality knowledge and belonging to a social community (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006).

Methodology

The value of qualitative research on inclusive education is to make schools more equitable and to ensure greater equality of opportunity and outcome (Cooley, 2013). The purpose of the study was to explore the different interpretations of inclusion given by representatives of the VET field. The narrative approach became applicable for this study because it is a form of qualitative research where the descriptions of the participants' become the raw data (Butina, 2015). The narrative approach provided us with the opportunity to better understand VET representatives' values, experiences, and expectations. A narrative type of approach means that we have used the participants narratives as a data through which we have produced an explanatory description of inclusion (Bruner, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1995).

Design

The design of the study was carried out in our research team of professionals in education. The team's expertise included knowledge of teacher education, vocational education, special needs education, project management and administration. Working in a research group provided us with an opportunity to carry out the analysis together and discuss interpretations, which was a strength of the

study. It was also one way to ensure the reliability of the research. We found the semi-structured interview to be an appropriate method for the data collection (Galletta, 2013). The interviews created opportunities for discussion, to reflect with the participants on what they valued and thought. It allowed participants to make explicit their opinions that might otherwise have been left unsaid or unnoticed.

Recruitment of the participants

At the beginning of the research process, we contacted the school principals or development directors and sought their permission to carry out the research. After that, the school administration personnel (deputy principals, pedagogical managers, etc.) and teachers at the vocational colleges were contacted. Teachers asked voluntary students from their groups if they would participate. Those students expressed their consent to their teachers who also helped with the scheduling of the interviews. Work-life representatives and those working in public administration were contacted directly, and they were personally asked about their readiness to participate.

Data collection

Data for this study were collected by interviewing participants (N=53) of five focus groups. The participants were representatives of (1) VET college administration (n=10), (2) teachers at VET colleges (n=13), (3) working life (n=10), (4) VET students (n=12), and (5) public administration (n=8). The interviews were carried out by two researchers in the research group, which strengthened reliability. Interviews were carried out during the spring and autumn of 2021 mainly online because of Covid-19. Online interviews might also have been more comfortable and secure for some participants to discuss and share their experiences (Hewson, 2017). The disadvantages of online interviews were small technical problems and the lack of nonverbal communication. The interview process included some surprises. There was a considerable degree of variation among the interviews, with comments of unanticipated questions leading to lengthy discussions on the purposes of VET. We began interviews by asking the participants who were not students to define inclusion and its significance in their work. This question received a diverse reception. Some interviewees articulated clearly, and others found it difficult to verbalise their thoughts. Maybe we could have started with warm-up questions to set their minds at ease so that their stories would flow. The interview protocol consisted of 12 questions about the interviewee's conception of inclusion. We asked about the inclusive practices and methods, about their resources to implement these and about the main development needs for more inclusive education. Students were asked to describe their individual study paths and their opportunities to take initiatives related to their studies. Although we asked for the participants' definition of inclusion separately, all of the interview data were

for our analysis. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcription was carried out by the company that is a contracted supplier for this service. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, and quotations used to illustrate the findings have been translated to English.

Ethical considerations

The ethical commitments of the study were carefully considered before and during the research process. Participation was completely voluntary, and anonymity was repeatedly discussed with the participants. The study's ethical principles are engaged with the principles drawn up by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2019).

Data analysis

The data considered here totalled about 392 pages of transcribed text and were anonymised by making only generic references to participants. To build an abductive framework for the study, we reflected on related perspectives and theories during the analytical process (e.g., Rinehart, 2021; Timmermanns & Tavory, 2012). This means that the analytical process led us to the theories and vice versa, the theories guided our analysis. The data analysis followed the principles of qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012). At the beginning of the analytical process, we read each interview transcript repeatedly to become familiar with the material. This was a close reading which aimed at reduction of the data and getting an intensive outline it (Hinchman & Moore, 2013). Eight connecting themes emerged: belonging in education, accessibility, equality, equal opportunities, social belonging, integration, prevention of discrimination and special support. Then, to particularise and itemise participants' perceptions, another round of analysis using ATLAS.ti software was carried out.

Findings

In this section, the findings of each theme are reported sequentially. The purpose of the study was to examine interpretations given for inclusion by representatives of Finnish VET. According to the findings, the definition of inclusion is not unambiguous. Respondents connected their descriptions of inclusion with social belonging, accessibility, equality, integration, prevention of discrimination, and special support. Next, we present more detailed these dimensions that inclusion received in the participants' descriptions, and they are also summarised in the consolidated Table 1.

Table 1. Dimensions of inclusion in vocational education and training.

Definition of inclusion	National educational administration	Administration of VET institutes	VET teachers	Workplace instructors	Students
Social belonging	'Everybody has possibilities to participate in education and has a sense of belonging to that community'	'It is a right to belong to a group and feel like a valuable individual'	'Inclusion is a way of thinking; all are included, and they are welcome with a low threshold, and they are provided with needed support'	'Everyone can participate, and everyone has the possibility to do the same thing'	'I can be involved in teaching properly'
Access-ibility	'Education should be accessible for all'	'I'd like to attach to this language awareness as one of the topics'	'Support is provided in the current learning environment; it is provided on the spot'	'Accessibility is taken into account in everyday life in all ways'	'Let's find a way for me to move forward'
Equality	'School is for all. Structures should be flexible to serve each student'	'Education is equally provided for all'	'We should include all despite their background and try to engage them with the teaching'	'In working life, we talk more about equality and equal treatment'	'Each student is considered as an individual'
Integration	'It is the right to belong to a group and have a sense of dignity'	'[Inclusion] is connected to integration. Everybody can learn together'	'All students study together, and the support needed will be provided for the group'	'We have employees here of many different nationalities'	'The goals of the WBL have been considered with the employer and then started working'
Prevention of discrimi-nation	'It is very important to play a role in this, alongside acquiring skills and competences, to support young people to grow up to be good people, citizens and people involved in society'	'[Inclusion] means prevention of discrimination'	'Nobody is discriminated against, and there are equal opportunities to study for all'	'The point is that everyone is here as an actor'	
Special support	'Would it be possible in the future not to have such specialised vocational education and training institutions, but to be in the same educational institutions?'	'We are not talking about inclusion, but we are all the time talking about providing special support and what it means'	'[Inclusion] is a definition for special needs education'	'We have to acknowledge if a student has learning difficulties, etc.'	'Everyone works and studies in their own way'

Social belonging

Community and social belonging are the key contents related to social stigmatisation, which also emerged in the responses. Inclusion should be understood in a way that everybody is fully entitled to study and participate in society and communities as a full member despite illness, disorder, gender, language, culture, religion, wealth, skin colour or other factors. Every individual must have the opportunity to feel like a valuable member of a group, team, and community and where no one is excluded. Work-life representatives felt that students should be safely introduced to the work community and work-life in cooperation with teachers. The students' answers showed that they had been provided with individual study paths to support their belonging in education, positive agency, and the development of their competence identity. Their answers also indicated that the transition from the vocational institution to the workplace had been supported by on-the-job learning and work-related discussions at the workplace. Some of the students had also found employment in a workplace where they had previously had on-the-job learning.

Accessibility

Besides the social stigma, respondents often used the concept of accessibility. Accessibility was accompanied by the objective that vocational education and training must be accessible to all, and accessibility is considered in every possible way in everyday life. Accessibility was reflected in the physical, mental, social, pedagogical, and digital achievement of education in various learning environments, such as educational institutions, e-learning environments and working life. Accessibility was also associated with language and cultural awareness, which is taken into account especially in the perspectives of social and mental accessibility. The participating students felt that learning environments and forms of pedagogical support have enabled them to move forward in their studies. Accessibility was also linked to various digital tools used in VET and materials that must be available for everyone. Digital accessibility was highlighted in the responses of students and teachers due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Equality

The answers highlighted equality in inclusive thinking as a human right and as a school for all. The respondents spoke of a school that belongs to everyone and where its structures enable everyone to participate, learn and succeed as equal individuals. Equal opportunities for studying were reflected in the fact that everyone can study together regardless of their background, and everyone is accepted for who they are. In the workforce, students and employees are accepted as they are: There is no talk of social stigma at work, but according to the answers, equal opportunities are well-realised there. In work life, different students and

employees are encountered as individuals, and their individual needs are considered equally in the work community. The values, attitudes, and professional ethics of guiding persons, as well as the permissive and accepting operating culture of educational institutions and work, become important factors in promoting equality.

Integration

The respondents also compared inclusion to integration, which revealed many different perspectives, such as the importance of belonging to a group. For some respondents, integration meant integration into a study group where students with a need for educational support received individual support but had an opportunity to learn together with others. In work life, integration meant integrating different nationalities, language groups or students with special needs into the workforce and supporting them in getting familiar with the ground rules of Finnish work life.

Prevention of discrimination

Inclusion was also described as a key driver in the prevention of exclusion, as all people have equal value as individuals. VET plays an important role in this, as its role is to educate students to become good and balanced people and citizens (Act on VET 531/2017). The responses highlighted that no one should be bullied or discriminated against and students' entitlement to support to acquire competence according to the qualification requirements. Furthermore, students' ability to develop knowledge and skills according to their individual needs was emphasised.

Special support

Inclusion was also equated with special support and special education practices in the replies. Respondents identified specific support as a form of positive special treatment in support of inclusion, while for others, it meant integrating students in need of special support into vocational education and training. There are also special vocational schools in Finland, the role and significance of which are critically considered by respondents as part of inclusive vocational education and training.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to increase the common understanding of inclusion and to clarify the criteria for inclusion. The study strove to provide a new paradigm. According to earlier studies (Goman et al., 2021; Owal Group, 2021; State Auditor's office, 2021), there is a current need in the Finnish VET field to increase

collaboration between different stakeholders to ensure equal opportunities to study, to gain competence according to qualification requirements and to acquire work experience. The premise for collaboration is on shared views, values, and attitudes. To contribute to this discussion, we asked how inclusion is interpreted by Finnish VET representatives.

We found our research task multidimensional. First, the participants of the study voiced similar perceptions as the recent studies (Ebuenyi et al., 2020; Takala et al., 2020): Inclusion should be understood in a way that everybody is fully entitled to study and participate in society and communities as a full member despite illness, disorder, gender, language, culture, religion, wealth, skin colour or other factors. Administration representatives described inclusion through principles of human rights, they voiced inclusion on ideological level. As for teachers, work life stakeholders and students were more practically inclined. They spoke about the importance of individuality and understanding in different learning environments and in work. Questions of both educational and social belonging were explicitly available in participants' descriptions. They addressed the chance for all to study, to be part of the work life and society.

Secondly, the participants addressed the special support practices and individually implemented teaching and learning solutions as an answer to implement inclusion in practice. Accessibility was connected to physical, mental, social, and pedagogical issues in participants' answers though it seemed that special needs teachers were addressed as responsible for it. Our findings indicate that there is a gap between ideals and practice just as there has been different interpretations both in the research field and in practice (Florian, 2014; Reindal, 2015). The participating representatives positioned a student with special needs at the centre of attention and advocated his or her opportunities to study, to gain competence according to the qualification requirements and to be part of the school or work community though the questions of how and why remained unanswered.

It seemed that teachers and students would benefit from more resources, both for encounters with each other and with work. According to our findings, strengthening the thread between VET representatives necessitates common language and will (see Figure 1). We suggest that fundamental factors increasing inclusion in VET would be collaboration and shared understanding and further training, which was also indicated in earlier studies in the comprehensive school context (e.g., Lintuvuori, 2019; Paju, 2021). It is essential to recognise and identify individual prejudices and attitudes. Lifeworld of students, teachers, administration personnel and work life representatives are composed of various experiences in different situations in life, in different communities where they have been included or excluded both in work and free time. Inclusion is not any institutional construction, but it is developed and strengthened in interaction between individuals in different social settings. Crucial are those experiences where

one's belonging is at risk by the others in that group. Individual's earlier experiences together with the current atmosphere in one's lifeworld have an enormous impact on one's ability to engage with the principles of inclusion. Though in the school context the question is not only about the will of an individual because Finnish legislation provides the VET representatives with a strong ambition to include all in education.
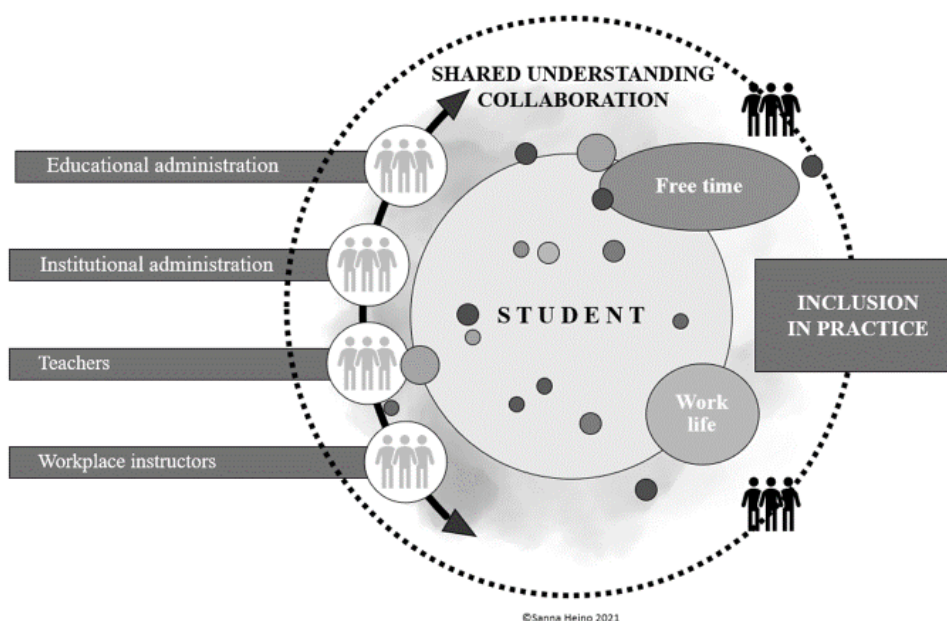

Figure 1. Inclusion in VET.

In line with Goman et al. (2021), our findings support the view that the VET system balances between being a part of a school for all and providing the labour market with skilled employees. If the aim is an inclusive VET, we argue that instead of emphasising individuality in gaining the competence according to the qualification requirements to be employed, more attention should be paid to shared understanding and values. This means providing versatile opportunities for students to belong which consists not only participation in work but the whole lifeworld of a student (Billett, 2014; Vuorinen & Virolainen, 2017). If quality in VET could be understood not only as measurable outcomes but in more nuanced and expanded way, it would provide opportunities for a more attractive VET (Tsagalidis & Terning, 2018).

This study had some limitations. Firstly, the number of participants from each field is quite small, which makes generalising the findings difficult. Secondly, we would have received richer data if we had started the interview protocol with an easier question. But on the other hand, we wanted to hear the participants' initial

thoughts without influencing their thinking, which improves the reliability and validity of the research.

In conclusion, inclusion is interpreted ambiguously in Finnish VET, so it is important to have a uniform definition at the national level. This would require co-operation with the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, the National Agency of Education, and education providers. A clear definition would facilitate the work of both education providers, individual teachers, and work life when the objectives and interpretations are consistent.

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