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Published online: 08 Aug 2021.

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From the shade into the sun: exploring pride and shame in students with special needs in Finnish VET

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study of the dynamics of social emotions and social bonds between students and class teachers by analysing the narratives of students receiving intensive special support in the Finnish vocational education and training (VET) system. Pride refers to a strong and safe involvement in interaction, and shame implies intimidated social bonds. The analysis is based on abductive content analysis for which Greimas' actant model worked as an analysis tool. We found some students showing high respect to their teachers who acted as senders setting the objects for students' studying. Pride is based on the students' experiences in achieving the objects, thereby pleasing their teachers and secondly on their ability to see positive development in their social belonging. The students who experienced feelings of shame did not perceive themselves as being subjects of positive development, but their special needs overshadowed their social relationships. They found it difficult to see approving and benevolent senders and receivers which could be interpreted as an explicit source of shame. The results concern not only individual teachers' pedagogical practices and ways of interaction, but also the whole VET system which addresses competence and effective individual study paths rather than social belonging and communality.

Introduction

People can belong in various ways and to various objects of attachment. Belonging is a dynamic process which has multiple layers (Yuval-Davis 2006, 2011). It is about emotional attachment, about feeling at home which might generate not only positive and warm feelings but sometimes also resentfulness and shame. To belong is a fundamental, powerful, and pervasive human motivation. It becomes articulated, formally structured and politicised only when it is threatened in some way (Yuval-Davis 2006, 2011). Individuals cannot flourish nor function alone, but social interactions are a quintessential part of human life (Stewart 2013). Being excluded from social groups might lead to anxiety or other forms of emotional distress (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Baumeister, Twenge, and Nuss 2002). Hence, the more threatened and less secure people

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feel, the more central become their constructions of themselves and their identities (Yuval-Davis 2006). When it comes to the school context, students who must compete with underrepresentation and with negative stereotypes are attentive about indications that could communicate that they do not belong or are not fully included in these settings (Walton and Carr 2012). Through lack of belonging, shame becomes then essential consequence that we are exploring in this study.

Earlier studies have indicated that emotions are a significant part of schooling and positive emotional experience promote increased personal involvement in learning (Naude, Bergh, and Kruger 2014). There is still a need for better empirical grounding on how emotions are understood, and which indicators of emotion should be used to improve learning (Hökkä, Vähäsantanen, and Paloniemi 2020). It is crucial to not only understand the causes of emotional events but also to a better understand of how these events influence students' and teachers' success in different learning environments (Schutz and Pekrun 2007). Emotions are experienced in the educational setting as well as being instrumental in academic achievement and personal growth (Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia 2014). Students' motivational and goal-related processes have also been associated with triggering a shame reaction, but on the other hand, they also can contribute to shame resiliency (Turner, Husman, and Schallert 2002). Teachers' emotional intelligence or social competence might sometimes relate to the difficulties in working with certain types of special educational needs students, and therefore the soft skills can be crucial in the teachers' work (Skura and Świderska 2021).

There has been an increased focus on listening to the students' voices in education (Cefai and Cooper 2010; de Leeuw, de Boer, and Minnaert 2018; de Boer and Kuijper 2020) but rather less attention has been paid to the students in the VET system and providing students with intensive special support. In the VET context, students experience a heightened sense of identity, an expanding striving for independence, while simultaneously seeking more mature and intimate relationships (Naude, Bergh, and Kruger 2014). Vocational students need enough time and support to create realistic expectations for the future. They benefit from safe learning environments and friends to engage with during their vocational studying, even more than workplace communities (Niittylahti, Annala, and Mäkinen 2019).

In this study our focus was on the experiences of the vocational students (N = 11) receiving intensive special support for their studying and examining their social bond with the class teacher. By using Greimas (1983) actant model as an analytical tool we could drill down to the actant positions in students' narratives and explore the social emotions of shame and pride occurring correspondingly. In the study we observed social emotions like shame and pride as the primary emotions that are present in all communication and action (Scheff 2000, 2003). We were motivated to the present research design by observations in our earlier studies (Ryökkynen, Pirttimaa, and Kontu 2019; Ryökkynen et al. 2021). Furthermore, we found this approach to be relevant because people with special needs are often in a different social position from the rest of the population (Kauppila, Lappalainen, and Mietola 2020).

The social bond between students with intensive special educational needs and class teachers was highlighted in students' narratives. It was also highly appraised because the students and the class teachers were drawing up personal competence development plans which are the central building blocks of the individual study paths in Finnish VET.

This bond between a student and a class teacher embodied a strong emotional charge which also emerged clearly in the students' interviews. The aim of this paper is to add knowledge that would improve understanding of social emotions and social bonds between students with intensive special educational needs and class teachers in the Finnish VET system. It advocates social belonging in VET schools and contributes to the discussion about the communality, social and subjective dimensions of VET, which are to be acknowledged with system level questions about competence and work life needs. Therefore, we ask:

Q1) What experiences related to the dynamics of pride and shame did students narrate in their social bonds with their class teachers.

Q2) What do these experiences tell us about participants' and about their activity and needs.

Intensive special support in Finnish VET

We undertook this research in Finnish VET colleges which have a mandate to provide students with intensive special support. Intensive special support is intended for students who have serious learning difficulties, disabilities, or serious health problems and who therefore need individual, transversal and diverse special support to be able to acquire professional skills and expertise consistent with the qualification requirements. Furthermore, the aim of support is to provide equal access of education to all students. Intensive special support is defined in the Finnish Act on VET 2017/531, §65 (Finlex Data Bank 2017).

The current VET system in Finland strongly emphasises individual study paths and close co-operation with labour markets and strives for an efficient transition from school to work (Publications of Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland 2019, 23; Cedefop 2019). The system allows students to apply units of the qualifications flexibly, and even smaller parts, corresponding to their own or their employer's needs. Individualisation can specifically benefit those students who can manage individually but then again it might marginalise those who have weaker self-regulation or social skills. The emphasis on individualisation as a pedagogic practice might have disadvantages in terms of missing opportunities to foster shared educational goals of socialisation (Biesta 2010; Eiríksdóttir and Rosvall 2019), that is, to become a balanced and civilised member of society as defined in the Finnish Act on Vocational Education 531/2017; 2§ (Finlex Data Bank 2017). Everyone should be able to experience the personal benefits of acquisition of high-quality knowledge and belonging to a social community (Arnesen and Lundahl 2006).

Social emotions shame and pride

For this qualitative research, we nominated shame and pride as the premier social emotions (Cooley 1922; Scheff 1990, 2000, 2003). Pride indicates secure social relations, through which individuals' experience of themselves is as being good and important, and correspondingly, the feelings that are registered positively (Scheff 1990, 2000, 2003). As

for shame, it signals troubles in a relationship and the existence of negative beliefs in one's social bonds (Scheff 1990, 2000, 2003). Retzinger (1995) elaborates on shame through which the other is viewed as caring less about the relationship than self: self is evaluated negatively or there are indications of alienation from significant others. Overt shame can easily be detected because of its bodily manifestations, whereas in bypassed shame, there may little or no explicit body arousal and therefore people are unaware that they are in a state of shame (Retzinger 1995). People in a covert state of shame might function poorly as agents or perceivers. Comparisons between self and other may occur, in which the self appears inferior, or the self might simply wonder if it is sufficient (Retzinger 1995). Ahmed (2014) suggests that the boundaries and surfaces are made through emotions which we respond to as objects and others. Shame requires a witness: even if a subject is alone, it is an imagined view of the other that is taken on by a subject in relation to herself or himself (Ahmed 2014).

Students with intensive special needs in VET might have found themselves to be insufficient and bear the stigmata at school because of segregated arrangements of special educational needs education and the definition of 'special needs' itself (Niemi 2015). Furthermore, the performance-oriented studying might have challenged them because they might feel frustrated and helpless for not meeting the standards placed on them (Oades-Sese, Matthews, and Lewis 2014). Shame might have threatened their social-emotional and academic resilience because they might have not managed to avoid comparisons between self and others. Socioemotional, behavioural, and learning problems have remarkably long-term effects on the young adults' educational careers (Hakkarainen, Holopainen, and Savolainen 2016). Whereas positive emotions, such as enjoyment of learning and pride, are linked to intrinsic motivation and interest in students (Pekrun 2011), experiencing enjoyment and success while working on a challenging assignment can contribute to growing self-direction and goal setting (Bach, Nicholson, and Hudson 2014). Therefore, positive teacher-student relationships become particularly important for students' academic development and engagement (Martin and Collie 2019; Oades-Sese, Matthews, and Lewis 2014). One important dimension of teacher-student relationship is provisions of instrumental help, but in addition the relative role of emotional support is to be acknowledged (Wentzel 2012).

Social belonging

In this study, we have treated the interaction between a student and a class teacher as being an emotional practice (Denzin 1984), which arouses and colours feelings in students and in those around them (Hargreaves 2000). Social belonging is based on the students' perceptions of the quality of these practices – whether they are included, valued, and respected by others in this setting (Baumeister and Leary 1995). According to de Boer and Kuijper (2020) students with special needs in secondary education experience multi-faceted problems including challenges in social participation. Socially stigmatised groups are more uncertain of the quality of their social bonds and thus more sensitive to issues of social belonging. Stigmatisation can give rise to belonging uncertainty, and that a sense of social connectedness predicts favourable outcomes (Walton and Cohen 2007). Furthermore, a lack of attachments is linked to a variety of ill effects on health, adjustment, and well-being (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Honneth (1995) elaborated the view

on one's personality: The lack of social approval might open up a psychological gap within one's personality, into which negative emotional reactions such as shame and rage could step.

Vocational schools internationally are seen as efficient career centres where students can acquire career competencies individually and undertake the actions and initiatives to direct their own career development, therefore the question of social belonging is relevant (Hargreaves and Fullan 2000; Jarvis and Keeley 2003; Mittendorff, den Brok, and Beijaard 2011). Schools are concentrating more on the individuals' learning than on communities. Pedagogical practices employed by Finnish vocational teachers vary, but in the schools' practices, the education policy objectives of an ideal student as self-governing and autonomous conflict with the teachers' lack of time and attention for the students (Niemi and Jahnukainen 2019).

Method

Design

Data for this study were collected by interviewing 11 students who were studying in the vocational upper secondary stream at Finnish vocational special schools. Though all participants received intensive support for their studying they could act and use their voice independently and autonomously which was one of the key ethical commitments of the study (Mietola, Miettinen, and Vehmas 2017). Qualitative research is particularly adept at illuminating and articulating the perspectives of 'hidden' or marginalised populations (Matthews and Cramer 2008; McPherson 2020). This was a significant priority for the study, given its focus on VET students receiving intensive individual support during their time at vocational upper secondary school.

Participants and data collection

First, we sought permission to carry out the research from the principals or research directors of four special VET colleges. Then, according to each principal's suggestions, the first author contacted eleven class teachers who asked students from their groups if they would participate. Those students expressed their consent to their class teachers who also helped with the schedules for the interviews. Participation was completely voluntary, and we provided a newsletter giving basic information about the research to all participants before the interviews. We informed the parents of underaged students and signed consent was obtained from the participants prior to completing the interviews. The concept of informed consent was approached holistically, which means that voluntary participation and anonymity were repeatedly discussed with the students (Mietola, Miettinen, and Vehmas 2017).

Participants could choose whether they wanted to participate in the interview face-to-face or via Skype. Skype was also used for reasons of scheduling and distance. The study used semi-structured interviews, which were conducted by the first author. The interview guide contained questions about the bond between a student and a class teacher. Participants were asked to describe their interactions with their class teacher: e.g. to talk about the language used in conversations, to specify the most common topic in these

discussions, how often they had an opportunity to talk with their class teachers and whether there had been enough opportunities for these conversations. Furthermore, they were asked to explain about their social relations generally and about their anxiety in these situations. We also asked participants to describe the actions that helped them in their studying and about their initiatives concerning their studying. Furthermore, there were questions covering students' experiences of class teachers' comprehension and listening. All interview themes were included in the analysis and were thoroughly scrutinised. The data used for this paper were anonymised by making only generic reference to the students, to the teachers and to the vocational institutions. The data collected totalled about 11 hours of interviews, transcribed into 194 pages of text.

The ages of the interviewees varied from 17 to 34, with most of the students being under 20 years of age. Two of the students were in their first year at the vocational institute, four students were to finish their three-year study programme in spring 2018 and five of them were in the middle of the programme. Eight students were studying for a vocational upper secondary qualification in Business and Administration and three students in Information and Communication Technology.

Data analysis

At the beginning of the analytical process, we read each interview transcript repeatedly to become familiar with the material. This close reading resulted in us writing a case story of each interview. This meant clarifying and organising the essential themes and actor dispositions of disconnected fragments into a coherent case story, which could facilitate the recognition of the dynamics between actors. Three connecting themes emerged from the analysis of the case stories: Theme1) topics which were associated with the students' positive or negative experiences of studying and to be a student; Theme 2) topics which were linked to students' private life, occasions and persons outside of the school; Theme 3) topics which were associated with the students' social bonds and sense of belonging. These three themes were positioned as objects in the actant analysis (Greimas 1983) which was the next step in the analysis process.

We used Greimas' actant model to recognise the actors in the case stories (Greimas 1983; Schleifer 1987). Furthermore, we scrutinised the thematics of pride and shame between these actors. According to Greimas (1983), narratives can be split into six actants (see Figure 1). The subject is the central actor of the narrative. The sender is one who motivates the subject to obtain the object and the receiver is the destination of the narrative or process. The helper supports the subject in achieving the object and the villain prevents realisation of the subject's aims.

Social emotions like pride and shame were intertwined with the actant positions explored in the case stories. In this study, the on one hand, the 'pride' thematic was assessed as being relative to the actant position of helpers, and on the other, to the actant position of the senders-receivers. Hence, pride becomes evident when the subject experiences that the actant in the receiver-position is assessing the object-position positively which is a result of subject's success in pursuing that object: For example, when a student described pleasure and gratification in studying which was reinforced with the teacher's acceptance. That is when the helpers contribute to the attainment of the object and to that good which is consequently experienced. On the other hand, shame becomes
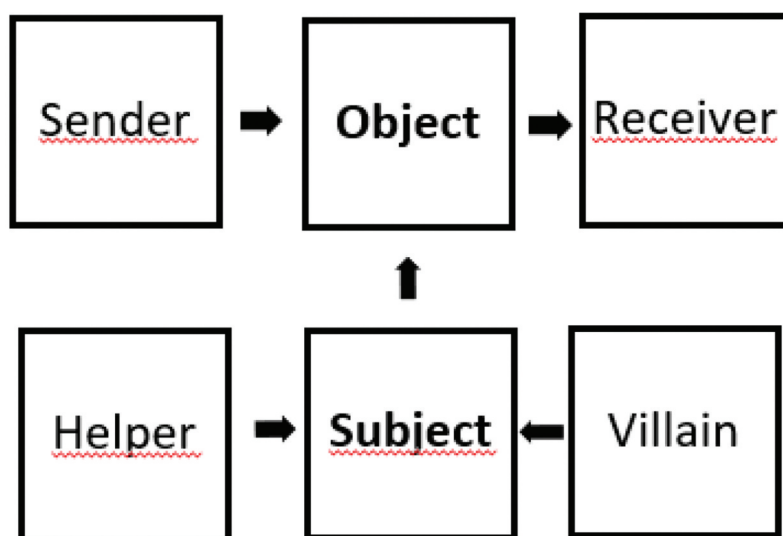
Figure 1. Actant model (Grejmas 1983).

apparent when the subject fails to attain the object, and the actant in the receiver-position assesses the object-position negatively, such as when a student described how their special need prevented success with school assignments and that they experienced insensitivity towards that. This is often due to the 'victory' of the villain or that the villain is superior in comparison with the object and the helpers.

The actant analysis produced two narrative types which we labelled by adapting Scheff's concepts of shame and pride as premier social emotions (Scheff 2000, 2003). Case stories (N = 4) that reflected students' positive experiences of studying and belonging were named Pride stories. Stories (N = 6) that described fundamental failure or unattainable goals, stagnating in life and/or descriptions of detachment and exclusion created a group named Shame. Furthermore, there was one case story which was ambivalent, meaning it had characteristics of both groups. This case story was analysed both as a Pride story and as a Shame story.

Consequently, to build an abductive framework for the study, we reflected on related perspectives and theories during the analytical process (e.g. Brinkmann 2014; Rinehart 2021; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). This means that the analytical process led us to the theories and vice versa, the theories guided our analysis.

Results

Pride: stories of success in studying and sense of belonging

Students were the subjects, the main characters in *Pride* stories. They described themselves as precise and conscientious students. Although they described their difficulties in learning as one of the villains hindering their success at school, they had a positive opinion of themselves as learners (Scheff 1990, 2000, 2003).

> I am a hard-working and conscientious student. One weakness that I can mention is my slowness in school exercises. But I am doing my best even though I am slow. (Student 8).

Participants highlighted the significance of teachers' help, attention, and acceptance, and they craved their teachers' understanding and presence. Teachers took the actant positions of a sender who set the objects for the students, a helper who helped with the assignments and a receiver who was pleased with the student's success.

> One of the most important things during these vocational studies is that a teacher, or to be precise, my Finnish teacher, has complimented me on my vigorous working with the exercises. (Student 11)

In *Pride* stories, students placed high respect on their relationship with their teachers. A powerful producer of pride seems to be the 'language and actions' used by the class teacher when interacting with the student (Jenson et al. 2004). These students described their class teachers very positively, with pride. They needed class teachers to help them in their studying and they valued highly teachers' understanding and support.

> My class teacher does not exclude anybody. My teacher is a sociable person, who relates to other people. As soon as I started studying at this school, I noticed that my class teacher was a very cheerful person, at least in my opinion. I can hardly say anything that would bother me, but maybe one thing is, that my class teacher is so busy and has so much to do [. . .]and I sometimes fall behind [. . .] she/he just doesn't remember everything, and I have to remind her/him. (Student 5)

Class teachers were both the helpers who helped students to succeed in their studying and the senders who set the study goals for students. Students did not tell their class teachers about their other career plans, at least if they collided with those of teachers. They did not consider that information relevant, but it seemed also that they did not want to raise doubts in their teachers' minds.

> My class teacher decides how we study, the contents. But my teacher considers my proposals. I think my voice is heard enough. But there is one thing that I haven't told to my class teacher: I would like to study more ICT. I did not bother to tell the teacher about these wishes, because perhaps I will have an opportunity to study these things automatically during my final study year. (Student 8)

For students it was important to please their class teachers and to meet their expectations. Class teachers were like gatekeepers of studying whose recognition was essential to the students, an essential source of pride (Scheff 2000, 2003). This produces an actant position of receiver for class teachers (Greimas 1983).

> If I have failed in something, or if I haven't done exercises well enough, then I have talked to my class teacher. We have then compromised which has made me happier. I have been able to continue with happy thoughts and have not been forced to something that I don't want to do. (Student 5)

Students described their social bonds positively. They had experienced loneliness and bullying during their earlier studying but their time at vocational school has provided them with a new start in many ways, though Niemi (2015) argues that the segregated arrangements of special educational needs education and the definition of

'special needs' itself are often interpreted as stigmatising. Participating students had friends and their impression of themselves as learners and as young students has changed positively.

> I don't feel myself to be lonely now. But I did earlier because I was bullied in comprehensive school, from the beginning till the end [...] But when I started my studying here, I got my first friends, with whom I want to spend my spare time as well. (Student 11)

In summary, positively experienced actant positions seem to be the most significant factors which have fostered these students surviving through hard times in their lives and studying. Success in vocational studying and class teachers' recognition are factors which have connected students positively to the school community, whereas success in social relations with peers is another positive experience. These are sources of pride and can be positioned in the receivers' actant position (Retzinger 1995; Scheff 2000, 2003).

Shame: stories of failure and loneliness

In *Shame* stories, students were the subjects, the main characters, but their impression of themselves differed from the students in the *Pride* stories. They expressed satisfaction with their studying, but they did not emphasise their own contribution. These students did not portray themselves as the subjects with positive development, but their psychological and other problems have overshadowed their lives and experiences of belonging (Scheff 1990, 2000, 2003). According to Jenson et al. (2004) students with special educational needs are often subjected to even more shame in the classroom than others. In the *Shame* stories referred to in this study, this was obvious because students' personal experiences and difficulties seemed to hinder students in receiving their objects like success in studying and in social relations. These factors could be positioned as the villains resisting the attainment of desired objects. It seems that these villains were the winners of the *Shame* stories: Students have had many failures in achieving their objects and they were not even able to see themselves as being entitled to the positive feedback and success. This can be assessed as an explicit indicator of shame (Retzinger 1995).

> A depressed mind says negative things about you. For example, if you tell someone about your problems, then your mind might ask you that why did you complain again? Do you want more attention, or what? This is how my mind talks to me occasionally. Depression is that kind of thing. (Student 10)

Students experienced isolation and exclusion. They described their social bonds negatively and hesitantly. Contrary to the *Pride* stories, the students of the *Shame* stories emphasised neither the positive recognition by their teachers which would have connected them positively to the school context, nor the empowering experiences of social belonging. They had experienced deprecation by teachers and peers, and therefore the actant position of the receiver is based on shame (Greimas 1983; Scheff 2000, 2003). These students had met insensitiveness and denigration which have affected their social confidence (Oades-Sese, Matthews, and Lewis 2014). They found interaction with strange people to be challenging and had therefore retreated from intercommunication.

> I have only a few friends. It is because I am physically disabled. That is why I withdraw in my own world. I am badly disappointed at my social relations. Yesterday I visited my psychologist because I felt that I couldn't take anymore. I try to be as normal as possible from others' point of view, but sometimes I can't bear up. (Student 4)

> I make friends easily, but in my hometown I'm sure that everybody has something bad to say about me. Here in my vocational school, I dare to express myself, I dare to wherever I want and talk to anybody. But when I go to my hometown then I only stay at home. I don't dare to go out at all. (Student 9)

Students appreciated the teachers' understanding, help and support specifically with school exercises and workplace learning. They respected their class teachers, but their bond to their teacher was looser than that of students in the *Pride* stories (Scheff 1990, 2000, 2003). Similarly, these students have also encountered bullying, but they did not speak about reconstructive experiences as clearly as the students of the *Pride* stories. Students' families and rehabilitation personnel were emphasised when students discussed their private life and health issues. They have received unquestionable support and understanding from these sources. However, none of the class teachers, peers, family members, rehabilitation counsellors nor the students took the actant position of the sender or the receiver in students' narratives, but it is conceivable that those actant positions are fulfilled with the student's own emotional experiences. Students were not able to see themselves in the same world with acceptive and benevolent senders and receivers which means that they could not acknowledge and accept kind actions from senders and positive assessment from receivers. In conclusion, negatively experienced actant positions seem to be the most significant factors which have hindered these students achieving their objects, which was an explicit source of shame (Scheff 2000, 2003).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the dynamics of social emotions and social bonds between vocational students and class teachers in Finnish VET providing intensive special support for students by using Greimas's actant model as an analysis tool. The study strove for a better understanding of the students and their needs. Furthermore, the research addressed social emotions and belonging which are to be acknowledged with communality in the Finnish VET system strongly promoting an individual's competence and work life needs. Four case stories named Pride stories reflected the subject's positive experiences of studying and belonging. Whereas six stories which described failure or unattainable goals and indicated intimated social bonds were named Shame stories. Additionally, there was one case story which had characteristics from both types.

The findings indicated that shame and pride were related to the subjects' ability to allow themselves to enjoy a positive development in studying and social relations (Scheff 1990, 2000, 2003). Emotions appeared as boundaries and surfaces through which students responded to the objects and others (Ahmed 2014). Shame became significant if students' imagined view of themselves was negative and students found it challenging to meet the standards placed on them by the teachers or by themselves concerning their studying or their social relationships (Ahmed 2014; Oades-Sese, Matthews, and Lewis

2014). On the other hand, students required class teacher and peer acceptance but then again, their personal challenges and earlier experiences shaded their chances of accepting and trusting these actors as helpers and receivers. The finding supports the study by de Boer and Kuijper (2020) who argued that students with special needs experienced social participation problems at school. The emphasis on individualisation as a pedagogic practice in VET enabled the attainment of qualification requirements but then again it did not foster students' self-regulation or social skills because class teachers seemed to be the active senders who set the objects for studying. In line with Niittylahti, Annala, and Mäkinen (2019) we found that students benefit from safe learning environments, encouraging and understanding teacher and trustworthy friends. However, the subjects of Shame stories provided minimal opportunities for positive educational experiences or personal relationships during their earlier studying. This had strengthened their perception of themselves as insufficient, which according to Retzinger (1995) is an implication of shame. Students talked about bullying and exclusion related to their earlier studies, which might also influence their psychological, physical, emotional, and educational well-being (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Oades-Sese, Matthews, and Lewis 2014; Walton and Cohen 2007) and also on their educational careers (Hakkarainen, Holopainen, and Savolainen 2016). It is obvious, that the lack of social approval the students have confronted might have opened a psychological gap within their personality, into which negative emotional reactions such as shame and rage could have stepped (Honneth 1995).

In this paper the interaction between students and class teachers was regarded as an emotional practice and social belonging was construed as the students' perceptions of the quality of these practices – whether they were included, valued, and respected by others in this setting (Baumeister and Leary 1995). The subjects of Shame stories were challenged if the class teacher took the actant role of a sender who sets the objects or a receiver who gives the recognition for the attainment of desired objects. They could not perceive themselves as subjects of positive development, neither in studying nor in social belonging. Their psychological and other needs and the experiences of insufficiency overshadowed their views. Their sense of belonging was at risk. Subjects of Pride stories wanted to assimilate with their class teachers, and the accomplishment of the studying objects set by their teachers seemed to be a source of pride which strengthened their social belonging. They also described success in social relations with peers. Pride was linked to students' intrinsic motivation and interest. It contributed to growing self-respect and goal setting (Bach, Nicholson, and Hudson 2014; Pekrun 2011). In conclusion, positive teacher-student relation was particularly important for the participants which has strengthened their vocational development and engagement (Martin and Collie 2019; Oades-Sese, Matthews, and Lewis 2014).

Contrary to Niemi (2015), the subjects in this study interpreted the segregated arrangements of intensive special support in VET as a new opportunity. They made new friends and they were successful in their studying. Still, the definition of 'special needs' itself seemed to be stigmatising as was also found in Niemi's (2015) research. Participants wanted to be like any other young student striving towards independence, seeking more mature and intimate relationships and their place in the work force and community (Naude, Bergh, and Kruger 2014).

Although valuable insights about students' experiences have been gained through this study, there are some limitations that should be considered. The most important limitation

is related to the participants. The students participated in the interviews voluntarily which was an important ethical commitment of the study. They expressed their consent to their class teachers who we contacted first. Participants seemed to be active and committed students whereas those who were less committed and discontented with their studying might have produced a different view of the topic. Another limitation related to ecological validity of the interview protocol which produced fragmented narratives by the students. It might have been difficult for them to describe their experiences and reflect on their own situation. This might have resulted in short answers like no or yes.

Drawing on our findings, we argue in this respect, that the efficiency of Finnish VET, which is based on individual learning pathways and strives for rapid responses to the changing competence needs in labour markets, disregards students' social emotions and belonging. The results concern not only individual teachers' pedagogical practices and ways of interaction, but also the whole VET culture. The purpose of Finnish VET is to support lifelong learning and students' development as human beings and members of society, along with vocational skills. One conclusion from this article is that although young VET students with special educational needs may refuse to accept support and help, it is important that several forms of support are made available and that teachers have enough time for student encounters. Teachers' relative role of providing emotional support, so-called soft skills, is significant (Skura and Świderska 2021). Education on mental issues would give them both practical and attitudinal tools for this perspective. These students need repeated opportunities to be accepted as themselves in different environments. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, but strong and safe social bonds promote an ability to see positive development and thus to move from the shade into the sun.

Disclosure statement

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