



Experiences and Expectations of Transitioning From Vocational Education and Training to Work Life for Students With Intensive Special Support Needs

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RESEARCH



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ABSTRACT

In this research, we offer an insight into students' experiences of support and guidance in work life transition in a special education college in Finland. We also ascertain the future expectations towards work life of students with intensive special support needs. Assimilating theories on social justice and Peavy's (2004) sociodynamic counselling framework, we discuss the experiences and expectations the students have immediately preceding graduation. The data from 20 semi-structured interviews with students aged 18–28 were conducted in Spring 2020. We propose two questions: 1) What individual elements do students value regarding work life? 2) What socio-cultural elements do the students identify as necessary for a successful transition into work life? The data underwent abductive content analysis, and we examined the individual and social support structures that facilitate the school-to-work transition and labour-market entry. The findings indicate that students possess a great deal of practical, social, and workplace skills that support their employability. However, even when students have a willingness and eagerness to work, the reality may be that they are largely excluded from work life; only a few of the students anticipated to find employment after graduating. The discussion subsequently focuses on the extent to which vocational education and training systems cultivate adequate career readiness and how work life provides students with intensive special support needs with equitable opportunities for labour-market entry.

ABSTRAKTI

Tutkimus tarkastelee vaativaa erityistä tukea ammatillisessa koulutuksessa saaneiden opiskelijoiden kokemuksia tuesta ja ohjauksesta siirryttäessä työelämään, sekä työelämään liittyviä tulevaisuusodotuksia. Sosiaalisen oikeudenmukaisuuden teoreettisia lähtökohtia yhdistetään Peavyn (2004) sosiodynaamisen ohjauksen viitekehykseen, joiden avulla jäsennetään opiskelijoiden kokemuksia ja odotuksia ammattiin valmistumisen kynnyksellä. Aineisto koostuu 20 puolistrukturoidusta

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18–28-vuotiaiden opiskelijoiden haastattelusta, ja se analysoitiin abduktiivisen sisällönanalyysin keinoin. Tutkimuksessa kysytään, millaisia yksilöllisiä tekijöitä opiskelijat pitävät merkityksellisinä suhteessa työelämään, sekä millaisia sosiokulttuurisia edellytyksiä he hahmottavat onnistuneelle työelämäsiirtymälle. Tulokset osoittavat, että opiskelijoilla on monipuolisia käytännöllisiä, sosiaalisia ja työelämävalmiuksiin liittyviä taitoja, jotka tukevat heidän työllistymistään. Näistä valmiuksista huolimatta siirtymä työelämään näyttäytyy rajoittuneena: työhön kiinnittyminen jää vähäiseksi, vaikka opiskelijoilla on vahva motivaatio ja halu osallistua työelämään. Tulokset nostavat esiin myös jännitteen yksilöllisten valmiuksien ja työelämän tarjoamien mahdollisuuksien välillä. Tulokset herättävät kysymyksen, missä määrin ammatillinen koulutus tuottaa uravalmiuksia sekä miten työelämän käytännöt mahdollistavat yhdenvertaisen pääsyn työmarkkinoille vaativaa erityistä tukea saaneille opiskelijoille.

INTRODUCTION

Reliable, comprehensive data on disabled people in education and work life are scarce, and the number of disabled students currently studying in vocational education is small (Bartram & Cavanagh, 2019; Parekh, 2017; Pizarro Milian et al., 2024). We contend that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the problems facing many disabled people in achieving work life, but we aim to contribute to the debate on equal rights to employment. The definition of disability is open to many interpretations (Peltopuro et al., 2023), and to ensure comparability with prior research, the present research adopts the World Health Organization's (WHO, 2024) definition of disability, which includes people with barriers in social and physical interaction with their surroundings. While disability is conceptualised following the WHO framework, participants are defined by the Finnish category of *intensive special support*, an educational status indicating substantial support needs that may overlap with, but is not equivalent to, disability. Despite the growing diversification of contemporary education and work life and the topical relevance of the right to work, there remains a limited body of empirical research on this subject. This research addresses that gap by examining school-to-work transitions among vocational education and training students with intensive special support needs whose disabilities are not inherently exclusionary in the labour market.

Research has explored opportunities for people with disabilities in working life, highlighting how support mechanisms and enabling contexts shape the expansion of employment opportunities (Reid et al., 2025; Vornholt et al., 2018). Conversely, inadequate workplace accommodations shape and constrain individuals' opportunities for entering work life (OECD, 2025, p. 140). Still, less is known about how guidance in vocational education and training supports labour-market entry for students with intensive special support needs. While their employment rates are known to be lower (Hievanen et al., 2024; Peltopuro et al., 2023), students' own perspectives on school-to-work transitions have remained largely unexplored.

In Finnish educational context, intensive special support in vocational education and training is defined in law (Vocational Education Act 531/2017), and the Ministry of Education and Culture (2019) in Finland states that students with learning disabilities, severe disability or illness can receive intensive special support. In 2023, one percent of all vocational education and training students graduated with a degree from special education college (Education Statistics Finland Vipunen, 2025). Students with intensive special support needs wish to become a part of communities (Jokio, 2025), but the educational and work life transitions require supporting individual agency (Jokio et al., 2026; Korkeamäki 2023, p. 49).

From a social justice perspective, improving the position of socially disadvantaged groups benefits society (Rawls, 1971), a principle that is central to the Finnish educational tradition emphasizing equity (Ahonen, 2021; Silvennoinen et al., 2016, p. 14). Social position is strongly influenced by family background (Hart, 2019), and individuals affected by poverty, migration, and/or disability often enter vocational education and training—and subsequent transitions to work life—from structurally disadvantaged positions (Hart, 2019; Vornholt et al., 2018). For students with intensive special support needs, the transition from education to employment

may intensify experiences of otherness within educational settings and in relation to somewhat ableist labour market, potentially constraining access to meaningful employment (Goodall et al., 2024; Jokio, 2025). Consequently, school-to-work transitions should be understood not merely as individual pathways but as socially and politically shaped processes, aligning with the Salamanca Statement's emphasis on inclusive education as a foundation for equal participation in society and work life (UNESCO, 1994; also Hytten & Bettez, 2011).

Social justice theories emphasize the importance of promoting well-being and supporting those in disadvantaged positions (Mill, 1863; Rawls, 1971), yet such normative frameworks alone offer limited insight into how justice is experienced in everyday life. Questions of justice are also inherently context-dependent and shaped by competing priorities (Sen, 2009; Williams, 1973). Furthermore, experiences of marginalisation can limit individuals' opportunities and sense of agency in ways not captured by structural or policy-level analyses (Peavy, 2004).

Building on this perspective, the theoretical framework of this research draws on different traditions to contextualize the transition from vocational education and training to work life. The capability approach (Sen, 1999, 2009) frames how individual agency and aspirations shape students' opportunities in the school-to-work transition, while Peavy's (2004) sociodynamic counselling framework clarifies how guidance supports these capabilities within existing structural conditions. Mill's (1863) and Rawls' (1971) theories provide a normative backdrop, foregrounding well-being and justice as societal concerns. Together, these perspectives create the basis of the interpretation of students' experiences.

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING AND THE TRANSITION TO WORK LIFE

The role of vocational education and training is, at its best, to enhance both economic growth and social inclusion (Nilsson, 2010), and work-based learning as well as close collaboration with working life have constituted a longstanding foundation of vocational education and training (Brockmann et al., 2010; Pylväs et al., 2018). Currently, vocational education and training students acquire professional knowledge of work life via unpaid training agreements, or via paid apprenticeships (Vocational Education Act 531/2017). In Finnish vocational education and training, all students draw up an individual plan for developing their skills, which also includes an individual career plan (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2025). During work-based training, students are able to learn about participating in work life alongside work life skills, which enhances the learning process (Peavy, 2004). Having a summer job or attending a paid position before graduating (Cocks et al., 2015), as well as attending career education (Wagner et al., 2017), have a positive effect on the probability of obtaining employment after education.

Prior research highlights that employer attitudes and an inclusive workplace culture play a significant role in shaping individuals' experiences in employment (Schloemer-Jarvis et al., 2022). The acceptance and effective integration of a diverse workforce are strongly influenced by organisational leadership and management practices (Bartram & Cavanagh, 2019). In the Finnish context, Vocational Education Act (531/2017) assigns educators a key role in supporting both students and workplaces during work-based learning. There are also tripartite conversations including employers to support the students' learning and employment process (Andersson, 2018).

DIVERSE WORK LIFE

The definition of work can be constructed in relation to other people, and it can be viewed from social and individual perspectives (Anuradha et al., 2014). It also consists of personality traits, values, motivation, beliefs and individual future directions (Berings et al., 2004; Rosso et al., 2010). It may be conceptualized as a means to an end, functioning as an instrument for achieving individual objectives (Ros et al., 1999). Entering work life increases the possibility of creating new relationships, which are often greatly valued and hoped for amongst students with intensive special support needs (Jokio, 2025). Research (Ashley et al., 2023; Vornholt et al., 2018) imply that the level of requirements and qualifications has increased for many occupations, and the pressures to achieve economic growth might hinder equal opportunities to attend work life.

The contemporary employment market needs individuals with increasingly higher levels of education (Butler et al., 2016; Hoff et al., 2021), which raises concerns about the vulnerable status of students in special education colleges. The highest educated have the most secure work and the best incomes (Brown et al., 2020). This, in turn, increases the risk of less-educated workers achieving stable employment, and the probability of having lower incomes increases among people such as those who are the focus of this research. Hence, this leads us to the question of ableism in work life (Nylund and Rosvall, 2019).

Ableism, unintentional or not, (Friedman, 2020; Sen, 2009) leads society to attempt to “repair the disabled” instead of improving the structures or poor attitudes towards disability. One must, however, separate ableism from positive discrimination, where disadvantaged groups receive more security and support than better-off groups (Finnish Equality Act 1325/2014, 9 §; Ciftci & Ilkem Salman, 2019). There have been forward steps in many European countries to improve inclusiveness in work life, while legislation against discrimination has been well documented (Blommaert & Coenders, 2024).

METHODS

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this research is to present a viewpoint of students transitioning from special education college to work life. The research questions are as follows: 1) What individual elements do students value regarding work life? 2) What socio-cultural elements do the students identify as necessary for a successful transition into work life? Research question 1 explores how students make sense of individual characteristics that are considered advantageous in work life in relation to their experiences. Research question 2 examines how students describe and interpret the social conditions they perceive as supporting their school-to-work transitions. Rather than evaluating the adequacy of support structures, this research seeks to capture how individual traits, support and guidance are experienced by the students with intensive special support needs. This research context was selected due to a lack of existing empirical research on students in special education colleges, particularly from the perspective of their experiences.

PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

The data of this study (Merriam, 2012) were collected from 20 students, aged 18–28, in a special education college in Finland through individual interviews in Spring 2020. At some point, in basic education, they had all studied in special schools or in special education groups within mainstream schools. All the students were about to graduate within the proceeding few months, and they had studied in various fields. In the Finnish educational system, there are 11 fields and subfields in vocational education and training (Education statistics Finland Vipunen, 2024). The students studied in services (n = 6), health and welfare (n = 4), business and administration (n = 2), engineering, manufacturing and construction (n = 6) and information and communication sciences (n = 2). Semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2007) were conducted partly face-to-face (12 interviews) and partly remotely (8 interviews) because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The dataset offers no indications that the temporal context of data collection affected the results. As the pandemic was only in its initial stages, the participants had not yet adopted future orientations shaped by its anticipated consequences.

Permission to collect the data was sought from the special education college’s principal, and teachers were informed about the data gathering. Teachers shared information with students, whose willingness to participate in this research was explored. Students who consented to participate gave their contact information to their teachers, who passed it on to the first author. All the students gave both written and verbal consent, and the interviews were conducted by the first author. The interview themes were 1) the individual as a student, 2) the student’s everyday life, 3) the student’s experiences of counselling and support on their educational path, 4) experiences of work life and 5) thoughts about their future after education. This research concentrates on the themes 3, 4 and 5. Interview length ranged from 37 to 115 minutes, and they were transcribed onto 301 pages. The data is not accessible in relation to the confidentiality obligation associated with special education colleges in Finland.

Plain language was employed during the interviews to ensure that all participants clearly understood both the purpose of the research and the questions posed. It should be acknowledged that participation was voluntary, which may indicate that the students who took part were generally more confident and active in similar contexts. Individual interviews were selected as the most suitable method for providing each participant with sufficient time and autonomy to articulate their experiences, thereby enabling the collection of rich and comprehensive data aligned with the research's thematic focus (Guest et al., 2017). The interview settings were intentionally structured to promote a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere.

DATA ANALYSIS

There has been very little research on this topic that unites special education and guidance counselling within the context of vocational education and training. By assimilating social justice theories into our data analysis, our objective was to highlight the attitudes and expectations toward and experience of work life. The analysis was conducted with abductive content analysis (Minnameier, 2010; Thompson, 2022). The analysis involved identifying subcategories from the students' direct quotations, for example, "personality traits" and "values", and integrating them into the main categories derived from the theoretical model, such as "individual elements". The students' experiences were interpreted to identify different nuances in their experiences (Schreier, 2012). Altogether, the aim was, firstly, as Thompson (2022, p. 1411) states, to 'explain the patterns and story behind the data' and secondly, to clarify the students' experiences of the processes (Rutter, 1996, p. 604; Benner et al., 2021) involved in the school-to-work transition.

The data were read through thoroughly several times and then thematised as units (Krippendorff, 2004), from which the relevant data were collated. The student's original phrases or descriptive words were tabulated and similar themes found among them were colour-coded (Elliott, 2018; Thompson, 2022). These similarities were simplified as context units (Krippendorff, 2004) and placed in larger thematic sets. The first author was responsible of the coding while other authors commented. The second author double checked more thoroughly the subcategories, and some disagreements were solved in meetings. The whole research team participated in the meetings until mutual understanding was agreed on the main categories.

The main concepts were set into two categories from two different perspectives (cf. Baptiste, 2001; Noble & Smith, 2014): 1) *Individual perspective* grounded in the capability approach and sociodynamic counselling, where success in social life is understood as emerging from students' opportunities to utilise personal characteristics and future-oriented perspectives in ways that expand their perceived and actual possibilities for participation in working life, and 2) *Socio-cultural perspective*, where school-to-work transitions are understood as relational and socially situated processes in which individual goals and capacities are shaped, enabled, or constrained by social relations and normative expectations within broader social conditions. These two main categories were created by assimilating a wide theoretical background (Bauer, 2000): Mill's (1863), Rawls' (1971), Sen's (1999, 2009) and Peavy's (2004) theories were combined to create our research framework. While these theorists differ in their normative assumptions and priorities, their perspectives are brought together to illuminate different dimensions of social justice. Sen's capability approach shifts attention to individuals' substantive opportunities to achieve valued ways of being and doing, while Peavy emphasizes the importance of supportive relationships and social contexts that enable individuals to construct meaningful futures and navigate life transitions. Mill's utilitarian approaches emphasize overall welfare, whereas Rawls' prioritarian perspectives give weight to the life situation of those who are worst off. Rather than treating these perspectives as competing explanations, the framework uses them as complementary lenses through which equal opportunities can be examined. Social justice is therefore understood as the expansion of both actual opportunities and supportive social arrangements.

Table 1 outlines the implementation of the abductive content analysis, in which the theoretical background and the research data simultaneously and alternately engage in dialogue. The results are explored in the following with combining theoretical insights with the extracts from the interviews of the students. Some of the original phrases may have been shortened, and differences in dialect were dissipated to ensure the anonymity of the students participating in this research.

MAIN CATEGORIES	SUBCATEGORIES	DIRECT QUOTATIONS
Individual elements Social success through individual opportunities: <i>Themes on personal characteristics and future perspectives.</i>	Personality traits	<i>I am a good co-worker, and I will always support a friend. (Jouni)</i>
	Values	<i>I don't like to live on a basic income or rehabilitation allowance. I don't like living on that. I would see myself as a burden. (-) I think that I want to give something back. It's not fair otherwise. (Sami)</i>
	Motivation and beliefs	<i>With salary you must be able to live, and it's always a bonus if there's something left over. But that's the minimum, you must be able to live. So that you can be more or less comfortable. (Sanni)</i>
	Individual future directions	<i>My dream job would be that I would run my own business. (Ossi)</i>
Socio-cultural elements Individual goals and capacities along social conditions supporting transitions into work life: <i>Themes on work life transitions, social relations, and help-seeking.</i>	Individualised skill development as a socially situated process	<i>Well, I wish that I could be given some kind of good advice, like giving me the understanding that the world is open at the moment. (Hannu)</i>
	Scaffolding readiness from work life	<i>In my work-based learning, I've been in the kitchen at the daycare center, and then (at school doing basic cleaning. (Veera)</i>
	Social relations within workplace	<i>Yeah, that would be nice—to have coworkers. I mean, I won't have any right away, of course, but I'll get some little by little. (Liinu)</i>
	Early work life support during transitions into work	<i>I'm sure your employer will explain in more detail how things are done. Of course like that I will (need support). (Jori)</i>

Table 1 Theoretical framework and analysis of the research: the transition from vocational education to work life.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research was conducted in accordance with good scientific practice (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK, 2019), Finnish Data protection act 1050/2018, and the EU’s GDPR (2016). Students participated in the study voluntarily and were given the opportunity to withdraw at any stage. Before initiating the data collection, the students were provided a request of written consent to participate in the research (continuous consent, Klykken, 2022). Consent was requested again verbally before the interviews. The research group transcribed the interviews themselves, and the research data was not accessible to anyone outside the group. The students’ names have been replaced by the research group with pseudonyms that represent the thoughts of all the interviewees.

RESULTS

Work life experiences constituted a central part of students’ vocational education and training. Entering work life was described as a natural transition into adulthood and societal participation, with workplace communities perceived as meaningful contexts for belonging. Students expressed a strong desire to demonstrate competence and to contribute as committed workers. Paid employment in open labour markets was preferred, while salary level itself was not a decisive factor (cf. Koivunen, 2023). Students reported receiving guidance related to work life but emphasised a need for additional support during the transition, particularly with regard to workplace norms and conduct. Learning through participation at the workplace was viewed as essential, provided that supportive actions and conditions were present. Themes of equality, acceptance, and participation were prominent. Looking ahead, aspirations combining work, possible further studies, and broader social engagement with positioning as active contributors to future working environments, were described.

THEMES ON PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Personality traits

Work life requires both professional and social skills, such as confidence when meeting people for the first time, openness and empathy. The students possessed some traits that they highly valued in work life, such as loyalty and trustworthiness. Krista described herself as *fast, honest,*

active, effective... (-) I am like that I always listen all the way to the end, and I am not right away like no, no, no! Personality traits were seen as of paramount importance especially to those graduating to a profession where empathy would be essential for interacting with customers or patients. Across the student interviews, it was important that co-workers would be ready to help others. The students sought to be recognised as reliable, and initiative was highly appreciated – qualities that were likewise expected among other members of the workplace community.

I'm hardworking and really outgoing—maybe even a little too outgoing. I get along well with people, and I'm fun to talk to. I take advice and criticism in stride. And I'm always working on improving myself. (Olivia)

Values

Insights into what one could potentially give to society were widely interpreted in the data. Being an asset in work life was a general viewpoint even when recognising own limitations. There were, however, some doubts expressed, such as in Veera's statement: *I don't want my first days at work to label me as someone who can't cope in a place like this. I want to prove that I can handle it.* Anuradha et al. (2014) stress that working is seen as a social norm and is critical to people's beliefs and values. Therefore, to allow people to conform with this norm and feel a full part of society, working is essential. Also, giving meaning to other people's lives was valued as an important feature. A willingness to work with other people, for instance in nursing homes or in customer service, was another individual characteristic mentioned. Obligations towards other people were highlighted as a significant dimension. As individual skills were examined, one was expected to carry out and finish all the given tasks, and to do them efficiently.

I've worked a lot with the elderly. I have a skill for communicating with them. (Alma)

The desire to put into practice the professional skills developed during vocational education training was described, framing this as an opportunity to express aptitude for the chosen field of work. When given a choice, the students consistently oriented toward labour that was experienced as personally meaningful and the work aligned with one's hopes and values. If the tasks in the daily work became too repetitive, it was described as unappealing.

Motivation and beliefs

The motivation component was defined by stability and feelings of loyalty. Stability was expressed either as a wish to stay in the same job, or as an aspiration to achieve something completely different. As students navigated the transition into work life, ideal employment was often associated with service-sector jobs such as grocery stores and cleaning services, reflecting a search for structured roles, and achievable entry points into the labour market. Entrepreneurship functioned as a motivating orientation in work life, with participants emphasizing the importance of acquiring transferable knowledge that would support a future as independent workers, reflecting broader career development patterns (cf. Leuty and Hansen, 2011). Indirectly, the financial benefits of working were highlighted: of having paid employment would enable other life domains.

But I'd get to do work that I enjoy. I'd be able to improve my life in every way. I'd be able to do things because I'd be getting paid. And if the pay is good enough, I'd be able to make reality of the dreams that I have. (Perttu)

Individual future insights and directions

Work life emerged as a significant future-oriented horizon, perceived as a meaningful goal through which participation in society becomes possible (cf. Shaw et al., 2022). From this broader perspective, future work life was associated with increased responsibility and adherence to rules, understood not as restrictions but as shared and taken-for-granted working practices. Growing sense of responsibility was interpreted as part of engaging in work-related tasks more independently and with less external guidance. At the graduation stage, reflections on the future also became concrete through practical considerations. The transition from a familiar

educational environment to work life was a major step forward, often intertwined with other life changes such as moving away from the childhood home.

Work life was interpreted to be more varied than education, where everything was described as being largely uniform. An open and evolving orientation toward the future was evident, with education and personal development functioning as meaningful expressions of moving beyond current life situations.

Maybe I'll just keep studying. And maybe I'll get some kind of job. So I can gain some experience. I'll keep studying until I find the exact career I want to pursue. (Monika)

The pride associated with mastering a profession reflected a forward-oriented understanding of the future position in working life. Students highlighted the significance of self-respect as reciprocally linked to recognition within the work community. Work life was further framed as inherently collective, with emphasis on shared responsibility and commitment to common goals. The requirement for the best possible experience in work life would be that one must enjoy work, as Sanni reminded us: *Work must be fun! And not take too much energy.*

THEMES ON WORK LIFE TRANSITION, SOCIAL RELATIONS, AND HELP-SEEKING

Individualised skill development as a socially situated process

Individual skill development plans produced during vocational education and training functioned as socially embedded resources as the transition to work life approached. Through processes of articulating strengths and identifying areas for further development, these plans supported not only access to employment but also orientations toward participation in work life communities and broader societal contexts. However, awareness of available support structures for entering work life varied. Some state-subsidised measures were experienced as misaligned with understanding of progression toward work life and were therefore perceived as patronising rather than enabling. Nevertheless, as Ossi stated, the pre-work life support and rehabilitative elements were seen as *another link from education to work life.*

Individualised skill development took shape within socio-institutional contexts that both enabled and constrained participation in work life. Administrative systems, including bureaucracy and employment-related documentation, were experienced as overwhelming, signaling how access to work life was mediated by regulatory structures rather than individual capability alone. Guidance and support emerged as crucial for navigating these institutional demands, particularly where formal requirements and social security systems shaped entry into employment. Limited transparency regarding the labour-market value of completed qualifications further complicated positioning within these structures. Although the perceived timing of guidance needs varied, targeted support at key transition points functioned as a socially situated resource for negotiating institutional expectations and for strengthening agency and autonomy in relation to work life (cf. Peavy, 2004). Perttu thought that he would need additional training and support to work independently:

So that I would have that kind of knowledge that I wouldn't need to ask all the time, that "can you help me". When one has learning disabilities and all, it would be a big thing for me that I could do something by myself.

Scaffolding readiness for work life

Building competence and professional skills in collaboration with vocational education and training and work life emerged as a vital bridge in the school-to-work transition. Strong insights into readiness to enter work life were presented, often grounded in experiences of mastering vocational tasks and being entrusted with work responsibilities, while simultaneously acknowledging needs for support. Although work-based learning was mainly arranged by the education provider, students' involvement in decision-making appeared to strengthen the sense of preparedness. The combination of theoretical knowledge and practical experience with guidance and support thus seemed to play a key role in shaping students' perceived readiness for the transition to work life. Alma had a good experience with taking part in a tripartite conversation about employment at the workplace where she had conducted work-based learning:

When I had that work-based learning, and I worked well, let's just say. So as soon I had the evaluation day, the final evaluation [before graduating], the supervisor turned towards me and said that "Would you like to work here?". And I said that yes, I would.

Alma's account illustrates how workplace-based interactions can support transitions into employment. Her participation in a tripartite conversation at the workplace where she had been in work-based learning led directly to a job offer prior to graduation, highlighting the transitional significance of recognition and dialogue at the workplace. This finding is noteworthy given that employment remains uncommon among students with intensive special support needs in vocational education and training (Hievanen et al., 2024).

SOCIAL RELATIONS WITHIN WORKPLACE

Employer attitudes and workplace culture were key factors shaping the transition from education to work life. Work-life connections developed during education were experienced as valuable not only for work-based learning but also for creating social networks that supported emerging worker identities. At the same time, workplace environments and interactions with colleagues could also signal a lack of fitting in, leading some students to disengage from the idea of future employment in certain settings. Accurate and adequate guidance from the employer was expected, but there were experiences of insufficient guidance, too, like Veera describes.

The place was okay, but the guy [the supervisor] was just... I don't like that negative tone. When he says things to me in a negative way. (-) So, if I didn't know what I was supposed to do, I just stood there.

Early work life support during transitions into work

The need for at least some level of assistance with conducting work tasks after graduation was clearly indicated. Support and guidance were experienced to be essential when starting work, as was a basic induction which is the same as would be provided to all new workers. Working in pairs was a suitable induction method: that a more experienced colleague would stay beside and help to start the work tasks or show concretely how they are done. The importance of outside assistance was recognised in being able to work to the required level and to strengthen essential social skills.

Vili mentioned that the most important thing in work life was that *There everyone is equal. And that people are respected by the work and nothing else [-] So you will not be judged by your sex or how funny you are.* This reflects a broader desire for an individual to be part of the group without being forced to pretend to be something or someone else, as noted by Peavy (2004).

DISCUSSION

The aim of the present research was to provide an additional perspective on students with intensive special support needs in preparing for transitioning from vocational education and training to work life. The analysis approached students' transitions through two interrelated perspectives: individual and communal. From a latter perspective, the transition emerged as a socio-cultural process shaped by issues of shared responsibility of vocational education and training and work life. From an individual perspective, the transition was not experienced solely in relation to personal characteristics or predispositions but was closely linked to the development and application of competences acquired during vocational education and training. Within the context of special education college, students' educational trajectories and transitions into work life unfolded both within formal support structures and at the intersection of educational provision and work-life collaboration.

Life transitions can be an invigorating change, yet a source of uncertainty. The transition – along with the end of adolescence – was recognised in the research data as being inevitable (cf. Rutter, 1996). In this research, as in Shaw et al. (2022), the expressed hopes for a positive work-life transition, preferably directly after graduating, were accompanied by an eagerness and willingness to work. The findings showed, however, that the students had limited experience of working, and being paid for their work was minimal. The students' need for support is not

expected to diminish when transitioning to work life, so the responsibility for providing individual guidance and support will be transferred to employers. Although the data does not support definitive conclusions about employers' opportunities, expectations, or levels of interest, the limited number of students transitioning directly into employment suggests potential gaps in alignment between educational pathways and labour-market entry.

One reason for work life still being far from inclusive might be that, as Peavy (2004) states, contemporary life in industrialised countries does not value concepts such as compassion and ethical reasoning as highly as it does, for example, profit-making. Workplace accessibility in all its forms is often viewed as needing extensive modifications in the working environment, which is seen as requiring extra effort (Dolmage, 2017; Nilsson, 2010). It is not enough to have just an accessible work environment, as people and their attitudes also play a significant role in shaping an egalitarian corporate world (Friedman, 2020; Pylväs et al., 2018; Rawls, 1971; Sen, 2009). Participation in work life is meaningful, but support, such as individual guidance or working in pairs while entering the field, is required. The urge to contribute to society through paid work was a crucial element in our research findings.

In the Finnish educational system, everyone is entitled to have both a general education and vocational education and training free of charge. Rawls (1971) described this kind of structure as optimal for fostering social justice. It seems, though, that the reality does not wholly correspond to the theory. There are still many pathways for the students with intensive special support needs that need to be smoothened until we can state that equal access to work life has actually been realised for them (Pizarro Milian et al., 2024). As the number of work-aged individuals declines due to an ageing population (Vornholt et al., 2018), the level of acceptance of people who need additional guidance and support might increase in the workforce. The perceived capacity of students with intensive special support needs to contribute meaningfully to the workforce foregrounds a structural and socio-cultural challenge: the extent to which work roles and tasks are sufficiently adapted to meet individual needs and competencies.

Students' accounts in this research suggest that additional guidance and resourcing at the transition phase would be valuable, though the scope of this study does not allow firm conclusions about system-level provision (cf. Rawls, 1971). Furthermore, society should learn how to talk with, not for, individuals with such needs both in education and in work life. This includes the fact that self-contentment in an individual's situation is personal, and everyone should oversee the decision-making in relation to achieving one's own contentment (Williams, 1973). This demands respect for agency across educational and work life contexts (Dolmage, 2017; Jokio et al., 2026; Shaw et al., 2022). It must be nevertheless kept in mind that vocational education and training has an individual value per se, even when it does not lead directly to them accessing work life.

Believing in improving one's status through actions such as offering support but first and foremost career guidance during vocational education and training may make the future seem brighter on an individual level, and the likelihood of accessing work life is increased (Hart, 2019). Individuals need to be guided to find their true potential and secure their vested interests (Peavy, 2004). Assumptions made about people with special support needs are often made hastily or without knowledge about the individual's current situation (Parekh, 2017). Peavy (2004, p. 9) states: *Having been dealt a bad hand in life does not mean that the game is over.* Ultimately, fostering the success of individuals with intensive special support needs in education and work life represents not only a shared responsibility, but also an investment in broader societal well-being.

LIMITATIONS

In this research, we aimed to elucidate the participating students' experiences in their own words and contextualise them with our own interpretations. We also sought to provide objective reality (Maxwell, 1992) while understanding the possible biases that might arise due to the researchers' own, albeit hidden, attitudes towards the research subject. With this qualitative research, we are not looking to uncover generalisations but rather to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

The students participating in this research were some of the most capable attending the special education college, so the results may be affected by this. If, for example, people with intellectual disabilities had been selected as research subjects, their experiences of supported employment opportunities might be different (cf. Äikäs, 2012). Furthermore, most of the students with support needs study in general vocational colleges in Finland. These students, however, do not usually study with intensive special support. If this research had focused on the experiences of students with lower levels of need for special support, the results would probably differ.

Even if the students in this research had been informed of all the various support opportunities available to them, they may not have identified or felt that they had needed them. It can be interpreted that not all of the participants are fully aware of procedures behind the support they are offered. For this reason, the assessment of the adequacy of employment support measures during the transition to work is not reliable or unbiased in this context, seeing as it was supplied by the students.

In some cases, there have been suggestions that abductive thematic analysis has limitations in its validity (Thomson, 2011). In this research, we have meticulously followed both the background theories and the data together throughout the process to minimise the challenges in validating our research. Also, the limited space in this article is not optimal for extensive, experience-based research.

CONCLUSION

The transition to work life for students with intensive special support needs in vocational education and training is not only an educational and labour market policy issue, but a question of equality. This research shows that young Finns who have had need for intensive support in their studies are eager to attend employment and want to contribute to the economy and to society as a whole through working. The equal right to participate in society increases when the employment market recognises the potential of different talents, and individual experiences of success at work life increase their belief in the importance of acquiring professional skills. At its best, diversity in the workplace fosters creativity and interaction within the work community, which in turn increases overall satisfaction. As Mill (1863) and Rawls (1971) put it: individuals who are satisfied with their lives enhance also general social well-being.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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