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Article

Vocational special needs teachers promoting inclusion in Finnish vocational education and training

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Abstract

The role of Finnish vocational special needs teachers has changed during the last decades according to work-life needs and inclusive ambitions in education. In addition to substance competence, teachers need pedagogical knowledge and special education skills. This study investigates descriptions by Finnish vocational special needs teachers of the interaction with students who receive intensive learning support, and the study traces their opportunities to support the students in vocational colleges, work life, and society, and thus inclusion. We ask: (RQ1) How do vocational special needs teachers describe students with special educational needs (SEN) and their interaction with them? (RQ2) What in the vocational special needs teachers' descriptions promotes the students' membership in the vocational education and training (VET) system, in the world of work, and society in general, thus inclusion? We interviewed nine vocational special needs teachers who work as class leaders in VET colleges which provide intensive special support for students. The analysis of the interview data followed the principles of qualitative content analysis, and a category analysis was applied as a methodological tool to elaborate on the teachers' descriptions. The findings revealed three themes: (1) Students' profiles; (2) Interaction with the students; (3) Students'



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special needs. The participants of the study described the students and the interaction with them mainly in learning situations, but simultaneously they had a strong will to encourage the students' interaction also in different situations and circumstances, and thus, support the students' subjective and social growth. The study argues that to promote inclusion in VET it would be essential to acknowledge that the identity of vocational teachers is based not only on their identity as educational or vocational specialists but there is also a third domain which could be seen as a teacher agent's role as they construct a bridge between the college and real world.

Keywords: vocational education and training, inclusion, interaction, intensive special support, teacher, student

Introduction

There has been growing research interest in the inclusion of Nordic vocational education and training (VET) systems (e.g., Jørgensen et al., 2018; Schmid et al., 2021). However, little research is available on the VET system providing intensive special learning support in so-called special vocational colleges, or on the interaction between vocational special needs teachers and students with special educational needs (SEN). Most studies have concentrated on vocational competence, work-life skills, and pedagogical and governance issues of general vocational education and training (Siirilä & Laukia, 2021; Wheelahan, 2020). The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how vocational special needs teachers promote inclusion in the Finnish VET system, and how they provide intensive special support for the students by listening to the teachers' descriptions of the interaction between themselves and the students.

According to the Act on VET (531/2017, 64§; 65§) students in Finnish VET are entitled to special or intensive special support if they have learning difficulties, disabilities or serious health problems, and therefore need long-term and regular special support. Intensive special support is intended for those students who have serious learning difficulties, disabilities, or serious health problems. Earlier studies (e.g., Mäkinen, 2021; Nylund & Rosvall, 2019; Ryökkönen et al., 2022) have demonstrated that students with intensive special educational needs (who represent the minority (2%) of students in the Finnish VET system) encounter more challenges and expectations than other students in their studying, living and employment. These students' study paths have often been intensively supported at comprehensive schools, and most of them have studied full-time or part-time in special education institutions (Niemi & Mietola, 2017).

In Finnish VET, the interaction between teachers and students occurs mainly in teaching situations, or personal conversations when creating a student's personal competence development plan (PCDP), but also during informal meetings (Ryökkönen et al., 2020). A PCDP is made for each student in the Finnish VET system, and the personalization process is documented in it (Finnish National Agency of Education, n.d.). Class leaders are responsible for the formulation of a PCDP together with the students, their families, other school personnel, and prospective rehabilitation parties. Earlier studies have indicated that the quality of

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teacher-student interaction has an impact on the cognitive performance, motivation and well-being of students (e.g., Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Roorda et al., 2011; van Uden et al., 2014), and on the teachers' well-being (Spilt et al., 2011). Therefore, it is important to shed light on the vocational special needs teachers' descriptions of the interaction between them and their students with SEN.

In this study, the interaction between a student who needs intensive educational support and a vocational special needs teacher is understood as a social phenomenon in which talk is interactionally constructed and negotiated for particular purposes (Bakhtin, 1981; Goffman, 1981). The teachers' collaborative skills, and their skills related to student encounters and negotiation, can be seen as some of the core competencies needed in the changing teaching profession and in creating inclusive vocational education (e.g., Maunu, 2018; Tapani & Salonen, 2019).

We ask:

RQ1) How do vocational special needs teachers describe students with SEN and their interaction with them?

RQ2) What in the vocational special needs teachers' descriptions promotes the students' membership in the VET system, the world of work, and society in general, thus inclusion?

An inclusive Finnish VET system

Inclusive education and inclusion have many definitions both in the literature and in practical discussions. Göransson and Nilholm (2014) identified four levels of definitions of inclusion, which illustrate narrow and broader definitions. From a narrow perspective, inclusion concerns students with special educational needs and the role of special education provisions, which means that every student is entitled to the support she or he needs in mainstream settings (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). This study is engaged with the broader perspective, according to which inclusion concerns all students and marginalized groups, not only those with disabilities (Thomas, 2013). Inclusive education refers to a process of enhancing the community and the participation of all students in school, in the world of work, and in society (Haug, 2017; Raudasoja, 2021).

The current VET system in Finland is built on personalization and flexible learning pathways which means that students' study paths may significantly vary, because of individualising studies, emphasizing work-based learning and speeding up labour market transitions. Flexibility gives the students the possibility to complete entire qualifications, parts of them, or even smaller units based on their needs (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2018; Cedefop, 2019). However, personalization has been criticized for being too demanding for students with special needs (Niemi & Jahnukainen, 2019; Maunu, 2018). Furthermore, individualized learning pathways and stressing the importance of qualification outcomes can be seen as missing opportunities to achieve the educational goals of socialization and subjectification (Biesta, 2010;

2020; Eiríksdóttir & Rosvall, 2019; Ryökkönen et al., 2022) and becoming ‘a balanced and civilised member of society’, as defined in the Finnish Act on Vocational Education 531/2017; 2§ (Finlex Data Bank, 2017).

Inclusion can be seen as a main target of VET: all VET students should have the opportunity to enter education, the workforce, and wider society with a sense of ownership of their future (Ryökkönen et al., 2022). The right to inclusive education, training, and life-long learning to acquire and maintain the skills that enable everyone to participate fully in society and manage successful transitions in the labour market is also one of the European pillars of social rights (European Commission, 2017). The Finnish VET system strives for inclusion, although the equal implementation of individualized study paths, special support, and positive discrimination is still incomplete and there is variation depending on the VET provider (Finnish Government, 2021; Goman et al., 2021; Owl Group, 2021; State Auditor’s Office, 2021).

Inclusive VET pedagogy

In Finland, vocational teachers and vocational special needs teachers are educated in five universities of applied sciences, which have schools of professional teacher education. Vocational special needs teacher education is a form of competency training, which means that apart from teaching qualifications and work experience, vocational special needs teachers need to have worked with students with SEN before applying for the education programme. After qualifying, vocational special needs teachers work in different positions mainly in general vocational colleges or vocational special education colleges. Some of them might find employment in preparatory training programmes, workshops, and universities of applied sciences (Mäkinen & Eskola, 2020).

Finnish VET is competence-based, student and work-centred, which means that each student’s studies are designed and implemented individually according to each student’s PCDP. This calls for high pedagogical and substance competence from each vocational teacher to respond to the needs of the students, society and working life (Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Vähäsantanen & Hämäläinen, 2019). Thus, the vocational teachers’ profession can be viewed as a dual profession, which means that the teachers’ identity is based both on the teaching and vocational identity (Köpsén & Andersson, 2017; Wenger, 1998). Hirvonen and Peuna-Korpioja (2018) suggested that the role of a vocational special needs teacher is a triple role, which has altered during the last decades according to inclusive ambitions in education and is composed of subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and special education skills. According to Kaikkonen (2020), a vocational special needs teacher’s work is focused on the planning and implementation of individual study paths and teaching individually or in small groups. However, there is no consistent or clear job description for vocational special needs teachers in Finland, in the same way, that there is no clear definition of inclusion in education. Students with SEN need understanding and supportive teachers for their studying and to prepare for their career trajectories (Ryökkönen et al., 2022). They need guidance and help to find

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their places in the labour market and society, but above all, they need recognition of their skills and strengths. However, students with learning difficulties are in a different social and educational position than the rest of the Finnish population, although the main objective of international and national policies has been to improve their position (Kauppila et al., 2020).

Methods

This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of inclusion in Finnish VET, and the provision of intensive special support for students by examining vocational special needs teachers' descriptions of the interaction with one of their students, and by investigating what in their descriptions promoted students' membership in the VET system, in the world of work, and society in general, and thus describing inclusion. The data for this qualitative study was collected in the spring of 2018 by interviewing nine vocational special needs teachers, who worked as class leaders, and who are responsible for the students' PCDPs. The teachers worked at three of the six Finnish vocational colleges providing intensive special support for their students. The participants could choose whether they wanted to participate face-to-face or via Skype, which was also used for reasons of scheduling and distance. We chose two vocational fields which are popular according to the number of applicants and intake (Business and Administration and Information and Communication Technology). The data used in the study is part of a larger data collection which also consisted of the interview data of the students connected to the teachers of this study.

The interviews were based on three leading themes: 1) the teachers' descriptions of the interaction with a single student with SEN; 2) the teachers' descriptions of supportive and helpful interaction, and 3) the teachers' descriptions of the student's initiatives about their studying. These themes were elaborated through 26 questions in semi-structured interviews. Theme 1 consisted of questions about the teachers' experiences of interaction with one of their students. They were asked to describe the interaction and the interaction situations with the students, what kind of language was used, about their and the student's role in the interaction. The questions in theme 2 concerned the teachers' perceptions of the elements in the interaction which enhanced the student's study and career trajectories. The third theme invited the teachers to describe one of their student's activities concerning issues relating to their studying. The transcribed data was anonymized by making only generic references to participants.

Five male and four female vocational special needs teachers participated, who were highly experienced with 10–38 years of teaching experience in their careers. Some of them had spent their whole working lives in the teaching profession, but some also had other work experience. The participants had either bachelor's or master's degrees.

The study followed the guidelines of the Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics (2019). This

ethical commitment of the study contains not only the research practice but also what kind of understanding the study promotes and produces for these teachers and vocational special schools.

The study is not without its limitations. First, there were only nine teachers who participated in the study, but on the other hand, they represented three of six vocational colleges mandated to provide intensive special support for students. Secondly, the teachers were asked to describe interaction with a specific student, and the students seemed to be positively engaged with the vocational college, their learning, and the teachers. Those who had a more negative attitude might have provided the teachers with a different perspective. Thirdly, the interview protocol guided the teachers to concentrate on topics related to the time in vocational college, and future-oriented perspectives were bypassed.

Data analysis

At the start of the analytical process, the data was reviewed multiple times to form an overall understanding of the material. After that, the data were analysed manually for preliminary interpretations of the teachers' descriptions. The teachers described their students' strengths, challenges, and agency. They also narrated the students' social belonging in school, the workplace, and society.

The second analytical round was carried out using ATLAS.ti software. The purpose of this analytical round was to elaborate on the topics that emerged in the first round, summarize the data, and make it presentable (Mezmir, 2020). We constructed fourteen codes, which contained the teachers' descriptions of themselves and their students, their interaction with the students, the orientation and atmosphere of the interaction with the students, teachers' impression of the students' initiatives and activity, the helpers and villains in the interaction, and the teachers' interpretations of the students' challenges in social situations.

In the next phase, we developed three themes to answer our research questions and to support the structuring of the findings in a coherent form: 1) Students' profiles; 2) Interaction with the students; 3) Students' special needs. Furthermore, we complemented the analytical process with tools from a membership category analysis (Jokinen et al., 2012). The focus of the category analysis of the study was on how the teachers categorized the student's membership, and how they described their interaction with the students.

We applied an abductive approach to the research through an analytical process where one part involved our interview data, and the other part consisted of the theoretical propositions. Our initial theories for the study provided a framework to describe the data, the data was then compared with a broader theoretical background to elaborate and refine the themes and to fulfil the criteria for an abductive research approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The process thus evolved as a continuous shift in focus between theories and data. By examining the themes through the abductive application, theoretical perspectives informed

the construction of abstracted themes.

Findings

In the analytical process, we developed three themes 1) Students' profiles; 2) Interaction with the students; 3) Students' special needs to answer the research questions and to support the structuring of the findings.

Students' profiles

Two membership categories emerged in the teachers' descriptions of their students when elaborating on the data with the tools of the membership category analysis (Jokinen et al., 2012). These were probably universal concepts related to teaching: The teachers described "a good student" and "an active individual". Additionally, we identified a third membership category "a student with special needs" in teachers' depictions of their students.

A good student had special character traits in the interviewees' speech: a good student was described as kind, flexible, open, and approachable. For example, the interviewees stated things such as, "The student is very happy and social [...] and she/he likes to work with others" (Teacher 2). There were also a few references to not such desirable character traits, such as mentioning that a student may be too talkative, but mostly the interviewees positively described the students. A good student was also described as motivated, conscientious, and purposeful. For instance, some of the interviewees stated things such as, "The student is conscientious and performs the promised tasks and... all the assignments are done" (Teacher 4). A good student was reported to have a good attitude toward studying, and he or she sought information independently and concentrated on his/her tasks. A good student was also an active individual in the study group. He/she was social, actively in contact with other students, and worked constructively in the study group. For instance, one of the interviewees described such a student by saying, "The student has found friends in the group" (Teacher 3). As members of the study group, the teachers described students mostly through challenges. The students seemed to have difficulties communicating with other students.

The categories overlapped, and the teachers described a good student not only as a conscientious student but also as an active individual. In terms of agency, this sort of student dares to voice his or her opinion and asks questions if needed. For instance, one of the interviewees described this: "My student is a young person who has clear opinions about everything, and then he/she dares to voice her/his opinions" (Teacher 9).

The teachers recounted students as active individuals also when they talked about the students' role in work-based learning. The teachers described how some of the students had introduced the school at the Open Day, and some had been active in finding a workplace where they could be involved in on-the-job

learning. For instance, one of the interviewed teachers noted, “And then there has been unabashed help for certain activities: when we have open days here, the student often acts as a guide” (Teacher 6). There were only a few mentions of on-the-job training, mostly the teachers talked about studying at the educational institution, although work-based learning has become a much more important part of Finnish VET.

There were only a few mentions of social activity or social inclusion. Some of the students were reported in the narrations to be active in school activities or influencing school affairs. For instance, one teacher noted, “The student is an active member here at the level of our school” (Teacher 9). Some students were eager to talk about social issues, as another of the interviewed teachers explained, “After all, we talk a lot about things of a general nature, a lot of social things” (Teacher 9). Part of being a conscientious student or an active individual was related to the special needs of the students, and the third membership category—a student with special needs—was constructed accordingly. This was expressed for instance by one of the participating teachers who narrated, “The student is kind of quiet, really kind and reliable like our students [whom all have special needs] are in general” (Teacher 8). Different kinds of special needs emerged in the interviews, such as health problems, learning difficulties, processing speed, challenges with social interaction, disabilities, and lack of study language. For instance, one of the participating teachers described, “The student is so slow at processing things. He is, really, a student with special needs” (Teacher 8). Because of, or beside these problems, the teachers narrated the students’ lack of independence or initiative. One teacher noted, “But a special difficulty is that he must be strongly encouraged to do things on his own, to make his own decisions and to take initiative... to do things proactively” (Teacher 7). In this interview material, the teachers concentrated more on describing a conscientious student than his/her role as an active individual at work and in society.

Interaction with the students

The interviewees described that the interaction between the teachers and students happens both in planned situations, such as in learning situations, or when the teachers, students and maybe other specialists were formulating the students’ PCDPs, and in informal encounters, for example when the teachers asked the students for news when they met in the hallway. Some of the teachers mentioned that they talked regularly, and other teachers only met their students irregularly when needed.

The teachers recounted the goals of the interaction with students on many levels. The main goal of the student is to acquire skills and become professional in her/his field. One of the teachers described the vocational teacher’s role as follows: “I had more than ten years of experience in various jobs, so it was easy to absorb all kinds of practical stories and examples from that. And of course, interaction, it’s like everything [...] learning happens, and you get the same touch with the group [...] dialogue then arises”

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(Teacher 9). The teachers intended to support their students in the categories they narrated in their speech: as good students and active individuals. The interviewees also noted they had a special responsibility to support those students who needed intensive special support to be equal members of society.

The interaction in the school environment was often described through the teaching. The teachers discussed the role of the teacher in creating such a learning environment in which the students dare to express themselves. As an example, one teacher stated: “Of course, the teacher plays a big role in how he/she makes the students open up and discuss things and also be involved” (Teacher 1). The teachers argued that when the atmosphere in the classroom was open, the motivation of the students was better, and the students had the experience of being valued members of the study group. This was described, for instance, by one of the teachers who said: “That everyone feels good and is motivated to study through that. It is about how you behave in that group, is it like we are all together, or...” (Teacher 7). Through team building and a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, the teachers sought to support the students towards taking a more active student role.

In addition to active participation in the study group, the interviewees sought to increase the students’ courage to express themselves, their needs, and their desires. One of the teachers reflected on this by saying: “It is the responsibility of the teaching staff to strive... to influence the situation in such a way, that the circumstances become such that the student feels free to express his/her thoughts as sincerely as possible” (Teacher 6).

Additionally, the teachers talked about helping the students build relationships in and out of the classroom. Sometimes there had been disagreements between students or between a teacher and a student and resolving these disagreements could help the students to build effective means of interaction with others. For example, one teacher explained: “But I have heard that about a year ago, there was a small bullying case, in which the student was presumed to have been the bully [...] But we settled the disagreements, and the student has friends in the group” (Teacher 5).

In VET working life is an important learning environment, and the interviewed teachers tried to offer diverse opportunities for working life. For instance, one of the teachers explained: “So, we use team pedagogy in the school, in which students agree among themselves on the tasks they will do” (Teacher 7). The students were offered different situations in which they could practice their working life skills, and the teachers tried to reinforce the student’s strengths and competencies by providing them with suitable learning environments. The teachers tried to encourage students to take an active role in participating in the development of the teaching and extracurricular activities.

The interviewees described good interaction in that the teacher has no preconceptions, that he or she is interested in the students, that the teacher highlights their strengths, and emphasises successes. Good interaction meant that a teacher had time to wait so the other party could speak. One of the teachers narrated: “Well, we try to go through the strengths, we try not to stick to what they can’t do very well, but we try to stick to those strengths” (Teacher 7). Additionally, good negotiation skills, the right word choices and the courage to raise issues were part of the good interaction in the minds of the interviewees.

Students’ special needs

The interviewees talked also about understanding the special needs of the students. On the one hand, they wanted to understand the diversity of the students, and then again, they emphasised that students should be required to perform as much as their capabilities allow. One of the teachers explained: “I try my best to be accepting and understanding, but I also try to demand enough from them [...] I try not to be too gentle” (Teacher 8). Simultaneously, the teachers told us they strove to support the students to identify, understand, and talk more openly about their difficulties and special needs. For instance, one teacher noted: “Well, it would probably be the best, if the students would understand their own situation” (Teacher 7). This would help both the students and the vocational college staff in different learning situations to organise the teaching in the best possible way.

The teachers talked about students often being stressed or nervous about many kinds of interactions. They might have been stressed about the interaction with the teacher, with each other, or with people in working life. One teacher described: “The student chose financial and office work as a competency area and since he/she moved there, he/she had some challenges in studying and getting to know new teachers. [...] He/she was terribly worried about last fall’s on-the-job learning, but it went really well” (Teacher 3). It seemed that with the help and guidance of the teachers the students tackled the situations they were stressed about.

When a student has an intensive need for support, the teacher needs to rethink his/her position as a teacher. The needs of the students may sometimes be complex, and the teacher might benefit from cooperation with a school psychologist, social worker, or school nurse, who takes care of the student’s welfare. However, one of the teachers’ descriptions did not indicate reflexive collaboration between stakeholders: “We have different people discussing these other things. It is not the teacher’s job to interfere with other support, other than studying, and its progress” (Teacher 5). The collaboration with the students’ families and rehabilitation network was also significant for the teachers, although some challenges were also reported. One of the teachers elaborated on this by saying: “I am not sure how the student’s parents approach the student’s need for the support [...] they might have challenges accepting the student’s needs for support” (Teacher 6).

Although the participating teachers were highly engaged and experienced special needs teachers, who described their students positively, they also narrated their challenges in the interaction with their students. The problems were often connected with the students' special needs. One of the teachers narrated: "If a student has signs of below average intelligence, it means there are true challenges, it may mean that a really small amount is learnt and understood, and it means that there is a lot to do in the interaction with the student" (Teacher 8).

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate how vocational special needs teachers described students with SEN and their interaction with them, and what in their descriptions promotes the students' membership in the VET system, the world of work, and society in general, and thus inclusion. The findings revealed three themes 1) Students' profiles; 2) Interaction with the students, and 3) Students' special needs.

The participants of the study described their students in a very positive and empathetic way. The special needs teachers seemed to be active and supportive agents, with high engagement with their work and students. They tended to encourage the students to be good students and active individuals and to study and participate despite their special needs. Despite the ambition of the reformed Finnish VET, which emphasizes the teachers' role as coaches for students, the participants of the study had adopted a traditional teacher's position, which means that they actively guided and counselled their students. On the other hand, in line with previous research (Louw, 2013; Ryökkynen et al., 2020), it also seemed that the students had traditional expectations and attitudes toward their teachers, as according to the teachers' descriptions, their students looked to them for support in their professional and academic development.

The teachers' positive descriptions of the interaction with the students included the importance of encouragement and empowerment of the students toward taking more independent actions. This might have supported the students' membership in the VET colleges, labour market and society, and thus inclusion. Even though the participating teachers' perceptions of teaching were intertwined with socialization and the qualification domains of education, they described their profession also to cover the students' subjective growth as an important dimension of VET (Biesta, 2010; 2020).

When we examined the teachers' accounts of the problems hindering their students' success in their studying or on-the-job learning, the teachers used explanations which were mainly connected to the students' special needs and challenges in their initiative or social interaction. They did not refer to the elimination of barriers at work or in society, but they strove to support individual students to adapt to the demands. The teachers seemed to see their mission as a compensatory one, where the difficulties are placed and solved on an individual level. Additionally, although Finnish VET is closely connected with

working life, the interviewed teachers concentrated more on learning in the school than on-the-job learning, but this might have been due to the interview setting. Furthermore, the teachers pointed to insufficient or lack of real cooperation between professions within VET, which relates to their perception of inclusion in a narrow sense (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014).

Conclusions

According to the findings of this study, the special needs teachers' professionalism in VET special education colleges seems not only to involve dual professionalism, but it has a strong third dimension, which could be viewed as the role of a change agent, which is in line with the work by Hirvonen and Peuna-Korpioja (2018), Köpsén and Andersson (2017), and Maunu (2018). The participating special needs teachers described their positions in various ways: they saw the teachers' role not only in teaching knowledge and skills but also supporting their students' social skills and overall well-being. The transformational role of Finnish vocational teachers implies that teachers should meet the students as equals and collaborate closely with working life (Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Hirvonen & Peuna-Korpioja, 2018; Maunu, 2020; Vähäsantanen & Hämäläinen 2019). This means that the teachers' actions and attitudes are central to the construction of the bridge between the VET colleges and the world of work and society (Köpsén & Andersson, 2017; Wenger, 1998). According to our findings, it seems that vocational special needs teachers in vocational special education colleges, which provide intensive special support for students, work both at the boundaries of new and unknown labour market needs, but they also have opportunities to break down prejudices and support diversity at work and society. However, as demonstrated in earlier studies (Maunu, 2020; Niemi & Jahnukainen, 2019), this study argues that teachers, as well as students, would need more time to construct individual study and employment paths, which is in contradiction with the effective and agile aims of Finnish VET overall (Cedefop, 2019).

In conclusion, based on the results of the study conducted the participating vocational special needs teachers have adopted an understanding and supportive attitude towards their students. They depicted the students and their interaction as nice and easy, but teacher-led. However, their descriptions lack consideration of structural and attitudinal barriers impeding the students' membership in the world of work and society generally. We argue, that to promote inclusion in VET, it is not enough that teachers understand the special needs of the students, but both teachers, education policy, and the labour market need practices and measures which are disconnected from economic growth and efficacy. Thus, the study argues that to promote inclusion in VET, it is fundamental for the teachers to acknowledge not only their professional and teaching competence, but their role as change agents tasked with breaking down prejudices and negative sentiments, and they need to work for diversity in work and society. The study contributes to the international discussion on equality and equity in education and work and indicates a need for more comparative international research on the subject.

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In future research, it would be important to investigate how vocational teacher education could implement an agenda for social justice, and how vocational teachers and vocational special needs teachers could become change agents in their work. Furthermore, investigating teacher activism could create new sites for learning and participation for special needs students (Montaño et al., 2002).

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