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A PRIDE-theory-based analysis of a positive learning environment in a Finnish vocational education and training (VET) institution

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to analyse Finnish students' perceptions of a positive learning environment. Because of the reform of Finnish vocational education and training (VET) and the recent decrease of students' well-being, it is important to study how students' well-being and learning can be enhanced. This study applied the PRIDE theory to describe the positive learning environment. The acronym PRIDE is derived from these words: positive practices, relationship enhancement, individual attributes, dynamic leadership, and emotional well-being. The data was collected with semi-structured student interviews (N=12) from a northern Finnish VET institution. The interviews were analysed with a theory-based content analysis leaning on the PRIDE theory. The research provided important information of the positive learning environment from the students' perspective, through which learning environments that support students' well-being and learning can be designed and developed in VET. In addition, the study provided an example of how to use the PRIDE theory for analysing positive learning environments and education.

Keywords: vocational education and training (VET), positive learning environment, PRIDE theory, student well-being



Introduction

In Finland, about a half of students ending their compulsory basic education continue to vocational education and training (VET). Previously the upper secondary level studies were voluntary but starting from 2021, compulsory education expanded from 15-year-old to 18-year-old students (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023). It means that students have to continue to general upper secondary education (similar to high school) or to VET after basic education. VET is not just for the youth but also adults can develop their professional skills in VET through vocational upper secondary qualification, further vocational qualification, and specialist vocational qualification. Upper secondary education provides students with eligibility to higher education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023).

Vocational education and training (VET) in Finland and elsewhere have faced numerous changes during the past decades. In Finland, the reform of VET took place at the beginning of 2018, changing the education from a curriculum-based into a competence-based model that also included the idea of performance-based funding for VET institutions. The principle of VET was to perform student-centered education by providing opportunities for individualised study paths (State Auditor's Office, 2021). While previously students studied according to the same curriculum, now their competences are identified first and they study according to their personalised competence-development plans (Kapanen et al., 2020).

The principle of VET was to perform student-centered education by providing opportunities for individualised study paths (State Auditor's Office, 2021). The recent changes necessitate a more personalised approach to VET, while at the same time, the purpose of education is to develop students' future skills and abilities to adapt to the changing world of work (McGrath & Powell, 2016; Mulder, 2019).

The new focus for the individualised study paths and wide support for students require pedagogical development from the perspectives of teachers' work, support structure, and learning environments (State Auditor's Office, 2021). VET has changed also by its pedagogical approaches as the traditional campus-based teaching has been replaced by an increasing number of virtual learning environments and workplace learning (Belaya, 2018; Dirzyte et al., 2021). Workplace learning is a fundamental part of VET and its width and implementation is decided individually when compiling a student's personal study plan (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023).

In addition, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has posed its own demands on education. While the flexible teaching arrangements provide opportunities to student-centered learning and study paths, the lack of communality has been seen as a threat to student well-being (e.g., Syauqi et al., 2020). Feelings of fatigue,

insufficiency, and meaninglessness have increased not only among VET students but at other education levels too (Lavonen & Salmela-Aro, 2022).

The mentioned extended compulsory education in Finland necessitates commitment to upper secondary education regardless of the student's background. Previous research shows that factors in the VET learning environment have a great impact on how well students engage in their studies, especially those in danger of exclusion (Schmid et al., 2021). On the other hand, workplace-bound studies, experiences of success support from and positive, acceptive attitudes in teachers, and collaboration with peer students predict better engagement and performance in VET (Schmid et al., 2021). Thus, in the middle of national reforms, it is important to develop VET in a student-centered manner by noticing also those factors that support students' enthusiasm and engagement. A wholistic approach that pays attention to well-being and learning can be found from the framework for positive learning environment (Wenström & Kuortti, 2022).

In this research, we investigate Finnish VET students' perceptions of a positive learning environment. For this purpose, we use the PRIDE theory that is focused on the core elements of a positive organisation (Cheung, 2015). The acronym PRIDE is derived from these words: positive practices, relationship enhancement, individual attributes, dynamic leadership, and emotional well-being (Cheung, 2014, 2015).

The PRIDE theory as the basis for analysing positive learning environments

Positive education is a framework for including research in positive psychology as a part of education and teaching, focusing on the positive development and well-being of students, teachers, and others in all education levels (Seligman et al., 2009; White & Murray, 2015). Typically, the positive psychological approaches are implemented and studied through various interventions (e.g., Bernard & Walton, 2011; Elfrink et al., 2017; Katajisto et al., 2021; Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014; White & Waters, 2014). In addition, positive psychological research can aim to a wider positive change leaning on, for example, the strengths of the whole school community (Elfrink et al., 2017; Wenström & Kuortti, 2022; White & Waters, 2014). Although this viewpoint is widely used (White & Murray, 2015), positive psychological research focusing on VET has been scarce. Furthermore, the findings from, for example, basic education (De Nobile et al., 2017) or higher education (Rusticus et al., 2023) cannot be adopted in VET as such.

Positive education is understood here as the positive-psychology-based viewpoint to how education can support students' well-being through a positive

learning environment. Learning environment means the social, psychological, and psycho-social environment for teaching and learning (Cleveland & Fisher, 2014). Positive learning environments support students' well-being and learning (see also Leskisenoja & Uusiautti, 2017; Seligman et al., 2009; White & Murray, 2015). In this research specifically, we analyse the elements of the learning environment in one VET organisation by leaning on the PRIDE theory that provides a tool to operationalise the core elements of a positive learning environment (Cheung, 2014). The theory is less used in education settings but in Finland, some research exists at the VET level in relation to VET teachers' enthusiasm at work (Wenström, 2020; Wenström et al., 2018). The research at hand introduces a new viewpoint by focusing on students and how they perceive the elements of positive organisation in VET.

The PRIDE theory was developed to measure the level of positivity in organisations (Cheung, 2014). Cheung's (2014) positive organisational index covers the elements of PRIDE: positive practices (P), relationship enhancement (R), individual attributes (I), dynamic leadership (D), and emotional well-being (E). We introduce the elements next.

Positive practices

Positive practices are methods, processes, resources, and other guidelines and actions that create a positive atmosphere and enable positive development even in challenging circumstances (Cheung, 2014, 2015). According to Wenström (2020), positive practices promote other elements of PRIDE. Positive practices can be, for example, support for autonomy, acknowledgements for teamwork and communality (Pfeiffer, 2003). The impact of positive practices appears in positive emotions and strengthening communal and individual resources (Cameron et al., 2011).

Positive practices in education are actions to promote learning, teaching, and well-being. Pedagogical methods, such as teachers' positive communication skills and ability to support students' cognitive, social, and emotional resources, are positive practices (O'Brien & Blue, 2018). Personal learning goals and other pedagogical methods to support self-directed learning and autonomy promote well-being and are also examples of positive practices (Stefanou et al., 2004).

Relationship enhancement

Interaction and collaboration enhance focus on positive relationships that promote communality and an open atmosphere in the organisation (Cheung, 2014, 2015). Appreciation, compassion, forgiveness, and support have a direct impact on an organisation's performance and atmosphere (Cameron et al., 2011). Likewise, education organisations benefit from these features (Huebner et al., 2009) as they provide the grounds for study satisfaction and engagement,

positive teamwork, and reciprocal relationships that promote success in studies (Pietarinen et al., 2014; Roseth et al., 2008; Wentzel et al., 2014).

Peer relationships have cognitive, behavioral, and motivational influence (Kindermann, 2016) and promote students' autonomy (Hurst et al., 2013; Martin & Dowson, 2009). Especially for young students, peer relationships matter (e.g., Blaskova & McLennan, 2018; Gowing, 2019) but some findings also suggest that peer support is crucial for older students' success and well-being (Li et al., 2011; Tian et al., 2015).

Individual attributes

Individual attributes mean the active noticing of organisation members' strengths and characteristics, appreciation of different people in the organisation (Cheung, 2014). Cheung's (2014) definition focuses especially on character strengths (Seligman et al., 2005), but it is possible to view attributes also based on a wide conception of strengths that covers talents, skills, interests, values, and resources too (Niemi, 2018; Wood et al., 2011; see also Bakker & van Woerkom, 2018; Katajisto et al., 2021; Wenström, 2020). Combining strengths with individual goals makes achieving the goals easier (Mayerson, 2015) and more meaningful (Karima & Uusiautti, 2018; Wenström, 2020). In education, strengths recognition has wide-scale positive influence on well-being, success, motivation, and future-orientation (Gillham et al., 2011; Katajisto et al., 2021; Proctor et al., 2011; Weber et al., 2014; Vuorinen et al., 2021; Uusiautti et al., 2022). In VET, the personal competency development plan can, at its best, be used for supporting individual attributes in education (Wenström et al., 2018).

Dynamic (teacher) leadership

Dynamic leadership means leaders who inspire and support positivity in organisations (Cheung, 2014) and is also referred to as positive leadership (Cameron et al., 2003; Wenström, 2020). Hannah et al. (2009) emphasised the importance of positive examples that show trustworthiness, openness, expertise, and compassion (Mishra & Mishra, 2012). Thus, positive leadership is connected with positive emotions and interaction (Cameron et al., 2003) and performance in organisations (Wooten & Cameron, 2013). In this research, positive leadership is connected to the teacher's role from the student's perspective. Cheung et al. (2018) refer to teachers who collaborate, aim to promote meaningful learning, and provide resources. According to Cherkowski (2018), positive teacher leadership focuses on building communal well-being by highlighting every individual's positive development and learning (see also Quinlan et al., 2019), which is similar to the definition of dynamic leadership (Cheung, 2014; Hannah et al., 2009; Youssef & Luthans, 2012). Positivity in teacherhood means caring but not denial of negative emotions or adversities. Instead, positive teacher leadership becomes

crucial in challenging conditions when strength and inspiration are needed (Wooten & Cameron, 2013; Äärelä et al., 2016).

Reforms in VET have necessitated the renewal of teacherhood (Kapanen et al., 2020; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011; Wenström & Kuortti, 2022). Substance expertise is not enough but guidance, interaction, and future-oriented coaching skills have become more important (Draaisma et al., 2019) alongside networks, collaboration skills, and abilities to renew the pedagogical culture in VET (Wenström et al., 2019).

Emotional well-being

Emotional well-being in the PRIDE theory refers to how positive emotions and atmosphere are supported in the organisation (Cheung, 2014). Positive emotions are connected with individual and communal growth and well-being (Sekerka et al., 2012). Actually, positive emotions have an important role in well-being because they are interconnected with strengths recognition and positive interaction with other people (Seligman, 2011). In the learning environment, positive emotions spread easily and are connected with study well-being and success (Frenzel et al., 2018; Lu & Buchanan, 2014; Zullig et al., 2011).

Method

The aim of this study was to investigate students' perceptions of a positive learning environment. The research question was: How do the Finnish VET students describe the elements of a positive learning environment? A qualitative research approach was chosen, and the PRIDE theory provided the theoretical framework for the analysis.

The data were collected through themed interviews that were decided based on the PRIDE theory (Percy et al., 2015). The interview guide was designed by Wenström (2020) earlier when conducting research among VET teachers. The guide was revised so that the questions were rephrased to match better with the target group (students) of this research. The interview consisted of five themes adopted from the PRIDE theory. Questions were for example 'Please, describe a concrete situation in which you noticed that you learned the best.' (P); 'What kinds of characteristics or methods does a teacher who helps learning and well-being has?' (D); and 'In what kinds of situations have you experienced positive emotions in studies?' (E).

The research participants (N=12, aged 16–45 years) were recruited from one northern Finnish VET institution which participated in a development project enhancing organisational well-being. It is a multidisciplinary institution of about 2,000 students and operating in three places in Finland. The institution provided permission for research, suggested students to be interviewed, and provided

their contact details to the first author of this article. The purpose was to find students of different ages and from different study programs. The first author also conducted the interviews at the premises of the institution. Participation in the interviews was voluntary and confidential, and the students received movie tickets as the reward. The transcribed interview data were anonymised and, thus, the second and the third author of the article did not know the identities of the interviewed students.

The students were degree students of social services and health care (n=8), and education and guidance education (n=4), who graduate as nurses or youth counsellors and guides. The assumption was that students in these fields would be interested in well-being issues and thus participating in this research (see also Galletta, 2012). All were full-time students, and most of them (n=10) studied their first year. Half of students (n=6) came directly from basic education, and half (n=6) were older students who had already been working. The interviews lasted from 17 to 57 minutes (mean 32 min.) and comprised 383 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The data extracts have been translated into English for this article.

The analysis followed a theory-led content analysis approach that is commonly used when the purpose is to strengthen or widen (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) or test an existing theory and its usability (Graneheim et al., 2017). Thus, the analysis started by creating a framework categorisation based on the PRIDE theory (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) followed by coding and categorisation of each interview under the five main categories. Each element of PRIDE had their own colour code and the themes arising from the data were organised by colours. The analysis continued by reduction and combination of themes resulting in wider groups under each main category representing similarities and differences between these themes (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Galletta 2012; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The result of categorisation represents features of a positive learning environment as described by VET students and organised according to the main categories of PRIDE.

This was a qualitatively-oriented interview research in which the ethical questions comprise the practical encounters with students, power relationships and respect, and confidentiality (Brinkmann, 2013; Roth & von Unger, 2018). The purpose in this study was to bring up the students' voices. It was important to emphasise in the interview situations that there are no right or wrong answers, and the students did not have to answer a question if they did not want to. The students were told that the interview data would be recorded and the transcripts anonymised. All their experiences were relevant and important for this research, and therefore, the findings also include numerous data excerpts to show how the students described their viewpoints about well-being and positive learning environments.

It is also worth noticing that an interview situation always presents a delicate power setting between the interviewee and the interviewer (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In this research, the interviews were conducted face-to-face in the students' VET institution which was considered a familiar and relaxing environment for them. The students were informed about the interview themes and the discussions were kept focused on the relevant topics (Roth & von Unger, 2018).

Results

Positive practices

According to students' perceptions, physical learning environment, various learning styles, and positive interaction supporting practices described the best a positive learning environment in VET.

The core elements of the physical learning environment were the school size, premises that supported teaching, learning, leisure, and the modern infrastructure. The students appreciated the small size of their institution because it made it easier to navigate at school and collaborate with peers and students. Colourful and modern premises were perceived as attractive and cozy: '...and there we have those sofas that are all of different colours. It brings colours especially when it is dark in the winter' (Student 3).

Various learning styles included collaborative learning, work-based and practical learning, and digital learning. Collaborative and work-based learning as a part of study practices increased well-being and enhanced learning. By collaborative learning, students mainly meant team working and building and sharing information and knowledge with each other. Getting experience from various teams was found to increase creativity, familiarisation between students, and improve interaction and collaboration skills.

Teamworking because people are social by nature anyway and like to hang around with other people and talk. When we do teamwork and discussions, you learn more all the time and it has a positive impact because you don't have to work alone but have a team. (Student 8)

Workplace learning and practical learning were described as a pleasing part of studies when the students could familiarise themselves with the actual work in workplaces during longer practices and short-term visits, too. Students enjoyed combining theory with practice. A clear, weekly schedule for studies made combining the theory lessons and practical lessons and periods better as sometimes they found it difficult to prepare for studies. In addition to practical studies, variation in theory lessons increased motivation and enthusiasm in studies. 'When you can do by yourself and suck information with all your senses,

that is totally different from studying from the textbook or by listening' (Student 8).

In the minds of the students, digital learning included all digital environments and learning methods from personal computers to interactive whiteboards, applications, and virtual learning environments. The most important point was that they perceived the benefits and how digitalisation can support their learning, which was possible only through proper introduction. Students named several practical benefits such as taking notes, searching information, and easy access to materials. Online courses made studying fluent at some points. In addition, the students appreciated the opportunity to follow how their studies progressed via online systems.

It is really convenient. For example, when doing a power point slide show at a computer and then share it between your team members. Even if everyone was not present, we could work with because you can do the tasks somewhere else too. (Student 6)

Practices supporting positive interaction were mainly greeting and having supervision meetings. Students emphasised that students and teachers should greet each other reciprocally.

We have here every now and then those personal study plan meetings with the teacher. We have a look at study progress and whether all is going well and what do I think and so on. The meetings give you a sort of peace of mind. [...] And at the same time, we discuss how I am doing and such. (Student 2)

Meetings with teachers were significant because they offered an opportunity to talk to teachers in private. Students found it important to be able to schedule meetings easily and especially before practical periods.

Relationship enhancement

Relationship enhancement was described in students' interviews as everyday interaction, human relationships and caring, and good team spirit.

At its best, everyday interaction was open, easy, and daily communication that everyone could enhance. Students appreciated versatile communication methods with pairs, in groups, with teachers and friends, face-to-face and via online applications such as WhatsApp groups for various study groups. Sharing experiences and thoughts, expressing opinions and various viewpoints taught students how others perceive the world. In students' opinion, this had a positive influence on learning through improved team spirit, motivation, and general well-being. 'This makes our group closer, improves team spirit when we discuss and listen to each other's opinions. [...] You find out that "oh you can do it like that"' (Student 3).

Relationships and caring were important bases for well-being but also for learning. Students mentioned peer support and help and how the culture of caring was cultivated through reciprocal helping. In practice, this happened through caring for those absent from school and keeping them updated on materials and tasks, asking how everyone was doing, preparing for exams together, and offering support in good and bad times. Peers make students feel a solid part of their learning environment which is meaningful for their well-being as well.

If you say something positive to your classmate [...] that makes the peer happy. So, of course, you could today say that now your hair is nice or you have a nice shirt, something like this, that you sometimes forget to do but would be really important things. (Student 7)

The meaning of team spirit emerged from the data as the students described the grouping process. They found it important that a guided grouping process started immediately when studies started. If they managed to form a close and positive team spirit that would make an important part of a positive learning environment.

Individual attributes

Individual attributes in students' interview data could be categorised as the recognition of strengths, applying of strengths, and development of strengths.

The personal study plan was seen as a tool that helps recognise one's strengths and also plan the usage of strengths. The students had done various tests to identify their strengths and talents. They also mentioned that they recognised their strengths in practical periods in workplaces. The feeling that the occupation felt their own was described as rewarding and increasing motivation to study.

I am very interested in various things about this field, I mean everything is interesting, trivia and all. I want to know it, and this kind of interest in the field is probably my strength. (Student 8)

If you were studying a field that is not your thing at all, that would decrease your motivation. But I wanted to study this and therefore I have a totally different touch to it. (Student 4)

The students pointed out that they could apply their strengths in various ways in their everyday studies. They could find suitable study styles by leaning on their strengths and focus on using their strengths during work-place learning. The students also paid attention to strengths outside studies, for example in their personal relationships, and perceived the connection of applying strengths with better learning results and well-being. 'Well, I am quite visual so I usually like to take notes in a notebook and use various colours. I remember which colour I have used and for example these things help remembering' (Student 6).

The development of strengths appeared as opportunities to learn new things and get support for studies. The new process of recognising skills and knowledge and acknowledging it as a part of a personalised study plan, offered students ways to focus on learning what they needed to learn. 'You don't just go with one format that offers everyone the same because not everyone necessarily learns in the same way' (Student 9).

The processes of building personal study plans were important because the needs for special support could be identified. The students also described their weaknesses and strengths that they would like to develop more.

Dynamic (teacher) leadership

The students described the dynamic leadership as the teacher's positive features, the teacher as a leader of emotional atmosphere, feedback and encouragement for students, and personal encounters with and support for students.

The core features in a positive teacher were humanity, enthusiasm, professionalism and pedagogical skills, and positive attitudes toward students' development. Furthermore, students appreciated fair, accepting, and calm teachers. The students mentioned how the teacher's own motivation was inspiring. Combined with professional expertise, teachers could earn students' respect. On the other hand, lack of abilities to use versatile teaching methods, share information, and notice the needs of various students were perceived demotivating. 'The teacher has to have the practical experience. It is needless to come and tell us about things if learned only from books. You have to have concrete experiences' (Student 7).

Dialogical and listening skills were important if the teacher wanted to create a positive emotional atmosphere. The students mentioned that the teacher should be able to read the atmosphere and act accordingly if it was good. For example, if students were tired or stressed, the teacher could show empathy or try to lift the spirit by smiling and laughing with students and by noticing negative emotions and dealing with them. In addition, collaboration between teachers and its significance was mentioned in the interview data.

It has a really big meaning. [...] If the teacher decides that now we do everything in teams, it doesn't sound very good. But if we think about it together and decide how we will study these things... (Student 1)

Always when we have a meeting, they smile [...] and in lessons, they ask whether we have any thoughts. And we discuss difficult things, and how to say, the teacher kind of gives room if someone finds it difficult. (Student 6)

Feedback and encouragement for students were mentioned as an important way of increasing motivation and belief in oneself as a learner. Constructive feedback was appreciated because according to students' opinions, it showed that the teachers could talk about issues frankly. However, positive feedback was found

necessary in order to enhance a positive atmosphere and positive emotions in students.

I think that the teachers encourage people to [...] be positive in general through their own behaviours. [...] There is no way to spur actively 'smile more' or 'wave more' but it is that the teachers bring it up by their behaviours. (Student 2)

These small things that they write in the exam paper 'you have done great, carry on' and something like this. Very minor things but they are really meaningful. (Student 10)

Personal encounters with and support for students appeared as approachability, trustworthiness, and understanding. The students appreciated teachers who seemed to genuinely act for the students' best and cared for students by asking how they were doing at school and in their personal lives.

The teacher does not have to cry with me if I am sad but at least could ask 'are you doing ok' if this is the situation. And very often our teachers ask 'how are you doing and what did you do there' [...] that's nice. (Student 3)

They are present. You don't feel like they are busy all the time and can't stop and focus on some specific issue. (Student 9)

The most fruitful and meaningful personal encounters focused on students' strengths and familiarisation with the students' situations. Knowing students by name and adjusting teaching based on students' needs were mentioned as concrete positive teachers' actions.

Emotional well-being

Emotional well-being was described by students as a positive atmosphere, experiences of success and joy of learning, acceptance of difficult emotions, and the sense of security. These notions were somewhat overlapping with previous elements of PRIDE but in this category, we focused on analysing how the emotions were described.

The positive atmosphere consisted of emotions such as communal, motivating, relaxed, and warm feelings. These emotions aroused in action and could be supported by friendliness, helpfulness, and focusing on the good. The physical learning environment was also igniting positive emotions and creating a positive atmosphere for its part.

I would say that quite much it is the positive atmosphere and [...] positive and determined, like you know in which direction you are going. [...] When you come to school, you notice that the presence here is that we go forward, and we develop. (Student 2)

Especially experiences of success and joy of learning were central for positive emotions. The positive feedback from teachers was mentioned as an important

way of providing these experiences. Through experiences of success and joy of learning, students felt motivated and more confident in studies and seizing challenges. Teamwork was often mentioned as a source of the joy of learning as well. 'You can remember or benefit from earlier successes. I managed that so certainly I can manage the next one. You use it as a kind of memory, like "you can do it"' (Student 1).

Acceptance of difficult emotions was mentioned as one factor in positive learning environments. The students described that in a safe environment they can experience and express negative emotions, and deal with them properly and supported by others. 'Emotions are tolerated, all emotions are acceptable, of course. You cannot have a good day every day. And then we discuss and ask how we are doing. [...] and show empathy' (Student 3).

Overall, the sense of security was a crucial feature of a positive learning environment and enabler of positive emotions that was created by the teachers, students themselves, and the physical learning environment. In addition to positive emotions mentioned previously in this section, the sense of security appeared as prevention of bullying among students and teachers. Teaching and showing respect as an unwritten rule were mentioned as the best way to prevent bullying. In addition, students pointed out some concrete safety measures, such as locking the doors during lessons, that for their part increased the sense of security.

Discussion

Based on the results, the multidimensional experiences among students about the positive learning environment could be viewed with the elements of PRIDE theory (see Table 1). The students' perceptions showed how the combination of the physical environment, atmosphere and interaction, various practices, positive emotions and the teacher's role formed the basis for building a positive learning environment. Also, students' positive attributes formed a distinct part of it being connected in the everyday activities, such as personal study plans, and future development including students' personal lives. Relationships with teachers and peers were evident in several PRIDE elements. The findings correspond with ones in Wenström et al.'s (2018) study among VET teachers.

Cheung (2014) described PRIDE elements clearly separately, but in this study, in the way the students described the learning environment, the different elements seemed to be in reciprocal connection with each other (see also Wenström et al., 2018). Interaction seemed to be a central feature and the foundation for the other elements. On the other hand, positive emotions that the students brought up apparently emerged from positive perceptions about the other elements of PRIDE. However, the teacher had the main role in creating a

positive atmosphere and relationships within which the recognition and use of personal strengths can happen.

Table 1. Results categories.

The element of PRIDE	Features of a positive learning environment in VET
Positive practices	Physical learning environment Various learning styles Practices supporting positive interaction
Relationship enhancement	Everyday interaction Human relationships and caring Good team spirit
Individual attributes	Recognition of strengths Applying of strengths Development of strengths
Dynamic (teacher) leadership	The teacher's positive features The teacher as a leader of emotional atmosphere Feedback and encouragement for students Personal encounters with and support for students
Emotional well-being	Positive atmosphere Experiences of success and joy of learning Acceptance of difficult emotions Sense of security

Thus, when analysing the students' perceptions, it seemed that the elements interacted highly, which is actually a typical feature of a learning environment (Manninen et al., 2007). In sum, a positive learning environment in a VET institution as described by students seemed to have similarities with positive organisations (Cheung, 2014). The similarities highlight how this viewpoint can enhance creating a positive learning environment in the changing world of work and VET. Furthermore, as the role of workplace learning is crucial as a learning environment in VET, the PRIDE theory can be useful for analysing also how the workplaces support VET students' positive interaction, well-being, and learning (see also Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020).

As such, the connections pointed out in the results support previous findings about students' well-being and how a positive environment can support their learning (e.g., Löfgren et al., 2023; Ryökkynen, 2023). Interaction, sharing, and caring among peers and by the teachers are similar to the notions made by for example Shan et al. (2014). The main contribution of our study is in the way the PRIDE theory helped operationalise the different elements that lay the foundation of a positive learning environment. The finding does not limit itself only within the VET institution but can also be developing the workplace learning as a part of VET since after the reform of VET, the majority of learning happens in the workplaces (Löfgren et al., 2023). Thus, it would be reasonable to apply research on positive learning environments also when developing the workplace as a learning environment (Pylväs et al., 2018). The PRIDE theory can be utilised for analysing and developing the learning environment as it helps pointing out which elements need further attention and how the elements also interact and support each other from the perspective of students' well-being.

When it comes to the recent reforms in VET, the study pointed out how the demands for efficient education should not be viewed separately from the students' well-being: positive education and learning environments support not only students' well-being but also their motivation to study (see also Löfgren et al., 2023; Ryökkynen, 2023). At its best, the positive learning environment supports successes, builds positive self-conception as a learner, and boosts belief in the future (Bonica & Sappa, 2010). School structures, autonomy, and collaborative learning were notions that appeared also in Väливаара et al.'s (2018) research, while the emergence of positive emotions and joy of learning were the key findings by Leskisenoja and Uusiautti (2017). Teamwork, enthusiastic and caring teachers, and communal atmosphere support learning and well-being, and there are findings that especially in VET, they support engagement in studies especially among students who have challenges in their lives and studies (Schmid et al., 2021). The PRIDE theory pays attention to self-directed action too, which can be supported by recognising and using strengths, personalised teaching and study plans, and focus on collaboration and communality (Ryan & Deci, 2002). However, all students do not possess skills of self-directed learning, and therefore, student counseling and guidance appear increasingly important in today's competence-based education (see also Katajisto et al., 2021; Kepanen et al., 2020).

Vocational School Student Survey (2019) revealed that students long for more face-to-face or on-site teaching, while the pandemic increased distance teaching and learning considerably (Lavonen & Salmela-Aro, 2022; Syauqi et al., 2020). The physical learning environment at the VET institution thus gets a more important role because it should provide opportunities for interaction,

collaboration, and various study methods, in other words using new pedagogies in a meaningful manner (Sandström & Nevgi, 2020).

Limitations and trustworthiness

There are some limitations in this research. The participants of this research represented just one VET institution and thus, their viewpoints can be considered somewhat limited. On the other hand, the interview data showed saturation and can be seen as an example of describing student perceptions widely in this particular example (Elo et al., 2014; Francis et al., 2010). Transferability of findings can also be questioned as the students in this study represented mainly the fields of social and health care and education and guidance. The findings might have been different among, for example, engineering students. However, findings from a recent study by Löfgren et al. (2023) among students in the field of technology and engineering were quite similar to the ones in our study.

For the trustworthiness of the research, we wanted to recruit various students for the interviews because after the reform of VET the student groups are very heterogeneous. The interviewees' age ranged from 16 to 45 representing quite well the reality of VET. The interviews showed that the students' needs for support and perceptions of a positive learning environment are various.

Conclusion: Using PRIDE theory to develop VET as a positive learning environment

This study widened the use of the PRIDE theory to analyse positive learning environments in VET. This is more topical than before because VET has gone through major structural changes during the shift to competence-based education and is now also corresponding to the demands of digitalisation. The reforms of education naturally follow and correspond to societal, sometimes even sudden changes (Morgan & Simmons, 2021). At the same time, VET does not attract students in the Nordic countries as it used to, and the Nordic countries have faced a lack of workforce with vocational education (Nordic Council, 2023).

At times of reforms and pursuit to attract more students to VET, attention to the development of positive learning environments is needed more than ever before. Student well-being should not be shadowed by administrative changes if we wish to serve the work life in the best possible way by providing quality VET. Our PRIDE-theory-based analysis provided a new way of paying attention to student well-being and learning in VET.

Students' perceptions and experiences of their current learning environments are significant for their own success and engagement and may have an even more crucial role than their earlier study experiences (Lizzio et al., 2002; Wang &

Holcombe, 2010). Therefore, having students participate in designing new learning environments would provide viewpoints that otherwise might be left unnoticed (Hunley & Schaller, 2009).

A positive learning environment is a multidimensional phenomenon widely affecting student well-being (Kern et al., 2015; Väliavaara et al., 2018). The PRIDE theory can provide a structured model for analysing and identifying well-being and learning-promoting activities and elements in VET. At the time of need for responding to societal demand for a skilled workforce (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, 2022), VET should pay attention to core elements of well-being and quality learning. It is the question of attractive VET that can also engage students and thus respond to the societal task the VET has. Positive VET learning environments also prepare experts who are ready for continuous learning, constantly changing work, and unforeseen future (Wenström & Kuortti, 2022) – with skills of using their strengths and optimistic attitudes.

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