

# TEACHERS EXPERIENCES OF EARLY INTERVENTION IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

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## Introduction

The well-being of Finnish students is worrisome. According to the school health promotion study 32% (n= 34776) of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students in vocational schools had difficulty in school and 19% felt that they didn't get enough support for their studies (Luopa et al., 2014). These results point to the need for student counseling. In vocational schools many support systems have been implemented. In addition to teachers and special teachers, study counselors, social workers, school health nurses, and psychologists offer support. Still, students felt that these steps were inadequate and support didn't always reach the person in need. The student has to be self-regulating and plucky to ask for help. However, the threshold to ask for help is too high for many.

Teachers' play a remarkable role in promoting school well-being and guiding students in their studies (Nurmi, 2009; Pietarinen, Soini, & Pyhältö, 2014). The key issues promoting school well-being are early intervention, dialogue, and flexibility. Early intervention in vocational education means providing support to students as early as possible. This process supports students and it starts from small observations and leads to actions.

Early intervention is most effective when the roles and input of different actors are clear. The holistic study-centered guidance model by van Esbroeck and Watts (1998) can be used to form the complete picture of student support and to define the roles and inputs of the different actors.

## The holistic student-centered guidance model

In the holistic student-centered guidance model, the student is the focus. The model contains three areas of student support: 1) personal guidance, 2) educational guidance, and 3) career guidance. Personal guidance denotes the support of the student's personal and social issues, which positively affects his/her development. At this level, early intervention is extremely important. The school staff should immediately respond to the student's needs. Personal support is also essential so that the student can pass his/her studies on schedule and plan his/her future steps after graduation. Educational guidance includes supporting the student's educational choices and the progress he/she makes in his/her studies. Career guidance consists of supporting the student's occupational choices and his/her occupational placement (van Esbroeck & Watts, 1998). These three areas overlap.

In an educational environment, different types of factors play a role in developmental support. First-in-line easily covers accessible guidance support. At this level, the staff consists of teachers who have been trained to develop awareness for sensing problems rather than solving them. This is the first step of early intervention. The guidance support is seen as part of the formal teaching function. The first-in-line-staff also consists of different tutors and mentors. In the second-in-line stage, the guidance system is also linked to the formal teaching function, but at this level there is some degree of specialization. The second-in-line staff includes counselors and student office workers. The third-in-line staff includes external specialists who are not necessarily involved in the teaching process. Their main tasks are differentiated diagnosis, remediation, and supporting counselors at the earlier levels. At this level the staff includes, for example, psychologists, social workers, and school health nurses (van Esbroeck & Watts, 1998).

However, the first step in student support is that someone senses the need for support and guidance. Teachers interact with students frequently and they have the possibility of noticing a student's situation in sufficient time and then supporting him/her.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to describe the vocational teachers' perceptions of students' well-being and experiences of early intervention at vocational schools. The purpose is also to describe how teachers care for students.

This study seeks to answer the following questions: 1) what student well-being issues do teachers find worrisome? 2) how is the teachers' care of students evidenced in their interactions with them?

### **Methodology and group**

The material for the study was collected from 2009 to 2011. It contains essays written by teacher students (n=20, 8 female and 12 male) from the school of vocational teacher education, oulu, finland. The participants described their own experiences of supporting vocational students as a teacher. They worked in different levels of vocational education: at the vocational schools (n=13), at the adult education center (n=5), and at the university of applied sciences (n=2).

The research used a qualitative approach. The content analysis concentrated on identifying the elements of early intervention and caring from the vocational teachers' own descriptions (guba & lincoln, 1981; holloway, 2011).

The next section discusses the findings in more detail by presenting the constructed categories with the teachers' citations between the texts (citations for teachers 1-20).

### **Findings**

#### **Teachers' concerns about students' well-being**

Teacher's worrying about a student is a good indicator that a student might need support. That feeling does not arise if the teacher doesn't know the student, if he/she is not interested in the student's well-being, or if he/she doesn't interact with the student regularly. Often teachers worry when a student's behavior changes. In order to notice the need for support and offer it, the teacher needs a close relationship with the student.

*"i notice that he has changed during studies. In his first study year he was happy and participating young and now he is uptight, tired and quiet." (m 3, vocational school)*

Absence from school is connected to school success and later to social exclusion, because regular absences affect implications for progress in studies (kaltiala-heino, ranta, & fröjd, 2010; lehtinen, ståhl, & saaristo, 2012). In this study, the teachers most often worried about student absences (n=12). In some cases, school absences had already caused a delay in their educational progress and difficulties coping with school. Furthermore, the teachers were worried about the students' life management skills, depression, and their use of intoxicants.

*"i fear, if i don't bring up the subject with him, he might become estranged from school, school absences might increase, and as a consequence of this, his study attainments will be delayed. At the worst he can drop out from the school." (m 14, vocational school)*

The teachers' worries were comprehensive. They were willing to support the students' study progression, but they were also concerned about them coping as a whole. School staff should be trustworthy and willing to support students and get involved in their troubles when needed. School staff should also be able to cooperate with other counseling staff and guide students to obtain special help if necessary. The study participants were aware of their responsibility and the significant role they played in preventing school drop-outs and social exclusion.

*"he has no one to turn to. I'm the only adult who is dealing with him. Maybe i'm the only one who can intervene in this situation. If i don't, who will? (f 13, adult educational center)*

### **Caring for students in vocational education**

The most significant issue in caring for students is being a grown-up and having faith in students, again and again (Linnakangas & Suikkanen, 2004). In this study the vocational teachers indicated that they cared about students. Teachers listened to students and wanted to help them in any situation. Vocational teachers were supporters and educators. They truly cared about their students and worried about their on-going situations and their future.

*"going to school might be his only contact outside home. It also might be the only place he gets positive feedback and self-confidence." (f 20, university of applied sciences)*

Vocational schools also have a duty to educate adolescents. Some of the students are young and they need guidance and support in their studies and in managing life. In this study, many teachers had internalized life management education as an inseparable part of their work.

### **Conclusions**

The aim of early intervention is to empower students and to curb worsening situations. In the larger context, early intervention tries to counteract social exclusion and displacement of adolescents (Arnkil, 2003). Early intervention in the context of vocational schools needs teachers who know the students and interact with them regularly. A caring teacher is able to recognize a student's problems and she/he persists in helping and supporting the student. Early intervention is based on caring and the implementation is seen in co-operation with all the school staff; there is no recipe for caring, so co-operation is essential. However, the holistic study-centered guidance model can be used to form the complete picture of student support; it can be used to define the varying roles and inputs of the different actors. Personal guidance means supporting the student's personal and social issues, and this is the level where early intervention is especially important (van Esbroeck & Watts, 1998).

Everyone wants to be cared for. According to the teachers, the students were willing to accept the support. They were relieved when someone was willing to support them in their studies and also in life management. The students felt that they were taken care of.

*"when we finished our conversation, i felt, that i had brought about something good. I believe that the student felt the same." (m 6, vocational school)*

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