Understanding the roles of positive school culture and climate in supporting students' wellbeing in vocational schools

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This qualitative study investigates how vocational teachers and support staff in Estonia perceive their roles in promoting student well-being. Through group interviews with 16 participants from vocational schools across the country, thematic analysis was conducted. During the analysis, patterns emerged that were closely linked to the aspects of school culture and climate. School culture is conceptualized as shared values and traditions, while school climate encompasses the everyday experiences of communication, emotional safety, and school atmosphere. A conceptual framework is used to illustrate how culture and climate may jointly influence students' well-being. The findings reveal variations in how students' well-being is supported across vocational schools, often shaped by institutional leadership, organizational fragmentation, and informal role expectations. Limited engagement from school leadership and poor internal communication were frequently reported, suggesting that staff often act in isolation without systemic support. These findings highlight the need for coordinated school-wide approaches to well-being that move beyond individual initiatives. The study underscores the importance of cultivating stronger institutional responsibility and leadership, as well as fostering a positive school culture in vocational education settings.

Introduction

An increasing number of schools (Shaheen, 2023) are recognizing the importance of fostering a school culture that promotes students' emotional wellbeing and social flourishing. According to the OECD (2023a) and OECD (2023b), students who feel a sense of belonging at school show greater interest in their learning process. In addition, it is widely acknowledged that the learning environment significantly impacts students' holistic growth and educational outcomes (Berkowitz et al., 2017). Various studies (Stanton et al., 2016; Awartani et al., 2008) demonstrate that a positive school culture, characterized by support and encouragement, enhances students' motivation and confidence, which in turn promotes their overall educational success and personal development. In addition, a positive school culture is associated with improved physical and mental health, providing a foundation for meaningful learning and personal fulfillment, as highlighted in various studies (Barrett et al., 2017; Fraser and Fisher, 2016; Weinstein, 2018; Berkowitz et al., 2017; Stanton et al., 2016).

The topic is relevant because mental health problems are becoming more common among young people around the world, including in Estonia. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one out of six young people experience mental health disorders, which emphasizes the need to address the mental wellbeing of students in educational institutions

(World Health Organization, 2021). A recent Estonian study (Bentsalo et al., 2024) focusing on the reasons for student dropout in Estonian vocational schools highlighted that, in addition to lacking academic motivation, low interest in the field of study, negative relationships, and communication difficulties in school, more and more young people are facing mental health issues. Different studies (Cohen et al., 2009; Barker et al., 2023) have found that positive school culture has a significant role in supporting students' social and emotional development in school. It encompasses the school's values, norms, practices, beliefs, and relationships within the school community and reflects the dynamics between students, teachers, and staff, as well as the school's leadership style (Cohen et al., 2009; Schein, 2004).

The motivation for this study arises from the recognition that supporting students' wellbeing is equally important as promoting their educational achievements in vocational schools. Educational strategies also increasingly highlight the importance of supporting student wellbeing in schools. The Estonian Education Strategy 2021–2035 (Ministry of Education and Research, 2021) emphasizes fostering students' comprehensive development by promoting their physical, social and emotional wellbeing.

The study emerged from a training program held at Tallinn University from February to April 2023. The program,[1] titled "Designing a Learning Environment That Supports Students' Mental Health and Well-Being in Vocational Education Institutions," focused on enhancing vocational school staff's competence in supporting students' emotional wellbeing. As part of this training, semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with vocational teachers and other staff of VET schools to explore participants' perceptions and experiences as well as school level practices.

The aim of this study is to understand the experiences of vocational teachers and support staff in supporting students' wellbeing and to explore how these experiences and practices are related to elements of positive school culture and climate, with the goal of creating a supportive vocational school environment that fosters students' wellbeing.

The following research questions were formulated:

- How do vocational teachers and support staff perceive their roles in supporting the wellbeing of students in vocational schools?
- What practices of teachers and support staff are associated with elements of positive school culture and climate to promote students' wellbeing in vocational schools?

Students' wellbeing and mental health challenges in vocational schools

Student wellbeing is a multidimensional concept encompassing emotional, mental, social, and physical aspects of students' lives. It includes a sense of safety and belonging, positive relationships with peers and educators, engagement in learning, perceived self-efficacy, and access to support systems. Central to student wellbeing are mental health, life satisfaction, and the ability to cope with academic and personal challenges (OECD, 2017; Pollard and Lee, 2002).

In recent years, there has been increasing attention on the mental health and overall wellbeing of vocational students. A study conducted among Estonian vocational students revealed that they face distinct challenges – including academic pressure, unstable life circumstances, and the transition from education to the labor market – which place them at a heightened risk of psychological strain compared to their peers in general education. (Bentsalo et al., 2024). Recent global studies have highlighted the scale of these issues, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. A study in China with 3,049 vocational college students found a high prevalence of mental health problems post-pandemic, including poor mental health (21.2%), anxiety (9.7%), depression (14.1%), and insomnia (81.9%). Contributing factors included reduced physical activity, disrupted education and employment, and deteriorating social relationships (Gao et al., 2024). Similarly, a study conducted in Indonesia with 1,381 vocational high school students revealed that over 60% of respondents experienced mental health issues during the pandemic. Factors such as social restrictions and the shift to online learning exacerbated these challenges, highlighting the increased vulnerability of vocational students during crises (Julianto et al., 2023).

In Denmark, a study with 5,277 vocational students explored the relationship between mental wellbeing and physical activity. The study examined four aspects of mental health – wellbeing, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction - and found that adherence to the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations for physical activity positively impacted students' mental wellbeing (Jensen et al., 2022). However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted essential support services, including Personal, Social, Health, and Economic (PSHE) education. PSHE lessons, usually delivered during form time or special sessions, were delayed as exam subjects took priority, reducing face-to-face interactions and limiting support for students' emotional and mental health (Jensen et al., 2022).

Another study conducted in Malta examined the mental health of vocational education students, including depression, anxiety, stress, and eating disorders. The survey, involving 422 students aged 18–24, revealed that 64.4% experienced at least one mental health issue, with depression affecting 43.3%, anxiety 48.8%, and stress 29.3%. Additionally, 36.7% were suspected to have eating disorders. The quality of life of the students was lower than the European norm, with only 13.5% seeking professional mental health support (Abela et al., 2024).

Also, the research conducted in Estonia among vocational students revealed concerning mental health issues, including anxiety, emotional exhaustion, low motivation and self-esteem, difficulties in social relationships, and a perceived lack of adequate support systems within schools (Bentsalo et al., 2024). Several students reported prolonged experiences of bullying, some dating back to primary school, which had lasting impacts on their mental health. Traumatic bullying experiences were linked to increased anxiety and depression, with some students perceiving staying at home as safer than returning to school. These ongoing issues have contributed to more severe mental health challenges (Ibid).

The Estonian vocational education system and student support services in its context

In Estonia, vocational education is available in both vocational education institutions and professional higher education institutions

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[1]   The training program also contributed to the broader research project "X."

(Ministry of Education and Research, n.d.). The system provides free initial and continuing training for young individuals and adults, ensuring they acquire essential skills and competencies aligned with labor market demands (OECD, 2023a; OECD, 2023b).

As of 2024, Estonia has 34 vocational education institutions, collectively enrolling approximately 27,600 students (Statistics Estonia, 2024). These institutions offer programs at various levels, including upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education, following the Estonian Qualifications Framework (Eurydice, 2023). However, around 25% of young people in Estonia choose the upper secondary vocational track, a proportion lower than in many OECD countries (OECD, 2023a; OECD, 2023b).

The vocational education system serves a diverse student population, including individuals from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and those seeking to upskill or retrain (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020).

According to the Estonian Vocational Educational Institutions Act (Riigiteataja, 2013), vocational schools in Estonia are required to provide support services to students. These services include career counseling, academic support, special education, social pedagogy, and psychological services (Ministry of Education and Research, 2024). The availability of psychology services and school counseling in schools has become increasingly important. Although the number of support specialists in Estonian vocational education institutions increased slightly during the 2022/23 academic year (from 35 in 2021/2022 to 41 in 2022/2023), not all vocational education institutions have enough support specialists (Ibid).

The workload of support specialists in Estonian vocational schools has increased significantly over the years. Data from the 2018/19 to 2022/23 academic periods indicate that support specialists in vocational schools have consistently carried the heaviest workload compared to their counterparts in other educational settings. This increased burden, coupled with the growing number of students with special educational needs (SEN) and a shortage of trained professionals, has created a challenging environment for vocational schools to effectively support student wellbeing (Ministry of Education and Research, n.d.; Haaristo and Kirss, 2018).

Vocational schools in Estonia vary significantly in terms of support systems: some have a dedicated support unit, others rely on a single specialist to fulfill multiple roles, and in some cases, teachers themselves take on the responsibilities of a support person. In that case, support structures are often insufficiently organized and may not always be adequately recognized by staff (Haaristo and Kirss, 2018). According to a 2018 survey (Ibid), support services in vocational education institutions can be categorized into four types: (1) Support by vocational teachers, (2) Support by designated staff, (3) Support by hired specialists, and (4) Support by a team of specialists.

The first type indicates that no dedicated support specialists are employed, and vocational teachers typically provide support when problems arise. This approach is adopted by about a quarter of institutions. The second type involves a broader group, including teachers and group leaders, also school boarding-house staff, head of extracurricular activities, school nurses, librarians, youth organizers, etc. Four institutions use this type of support services. The third type involves hiring support specialists, such as social pedagogues or psychologists, to provide services. About a third of institutions follow this approach. The fourth type features a team of specialists and a dedicated support unit providing a range of services. This type is also used by about a third of vocational education institutions (Haaristo and Kirss, 2018). These types highlight the varied structures of support services across institutions. Most often one person in a school fulfills multiple roles. (Ibid) For instance, a group supervisor or teacher may take on the responsibilities of a social pedagogue, even if they lack formal qualifications in social pedagogy.

Defining school culture and climate

This article explores the concepts of school culture and climate. To understand their interaction, it is important to define each term and examine their impact on the educational environment. School culture is often described as a complex set of norms, beliefs, values, behaviors, and traditions that shape a school's identity and guide its members (Barth, 2020; Lindhal, 2006; Barnett and McCormick, 2004). It influences how individuals perceive their roles, interact with others, and contribute to the school's mission, affecting both academic and social dynamics. While the terms "school culture" and "school climate" are sometimes used interchangeably, they represent distinct yet interconnected concepts (Barker et al., 2023).

School culture functions at a deeper, often implicit level, shaping attitudes and behaviors through enduring practices, shared norms, and collective experiences (Barker et al., 2023; Lindhal, 2006). It evolves gradually over time, embedding itself within the core values and traditions of the institution. In contrast, school climate is more observable and fluid, shaped by daily interactions, relationships, and leadership dynamics (McGiboney, 2016). It reflects the collective emotions, perceptions, and experiences of individuals within the school (Ibid). Because school climate responds to present conditions, it can shift due to changes in policies, leadership, or significant events (Vandana and Anubhuti, 2019). Ultimately, it influences how individuals experience their environment – whether they feel safe, supported, and valued.

The impact of positive school culture and climate in supporting the wellbeing of students in vocational schools

The concept of positive school culture refers to an environment that fosters the wellbeing of students, teachers, and staff, supporting their academic and personal development (National School Climate Center, 2024). Rooted in open communication, trust, collaboration, and respect, a positive school culture encourages active learning, enhances self-confidence and social skills, and lays the foundation for both academic success and personal growth. Additionally, research indicates that a positive school culture and climate helps reduce bullying, conflicts, and behavioral issues, while increasing overall satisfaction and productivity (National School Climate Center, 2024; Rhodes et al., 2011; Vandana and Anubhuti, 2019).

A positive school culture, climate, and wellbeing are deeply interconnected, as the overall school environment directly influences the emotional, social, and mental health of both students and staff (Barnett and McCormick, 2004; Turan and Bektas, 2013; Jessiman et al., 2022).

A strong sense of belonging fosters higher wellbeing, enabling students to thrive academically and socially within a supportive

community. For staff, a positive school culture enhances job satisfaction and reduces stress, leading to improved emotional and mental health. School leaders play an important part in maintaining this atmosphere by prioritizing shared values, open communication, and strong relationships (Turan and Bektas, 2013). A culture of care and mutual respect benefits both teachers and students, creating an environment that supports learning, personal development, and emotional resilience (Barnett and McCormick, 2004; Turan and Bektas, 2013).

The interplay between school culture and climate contributes to a unified, adaptable school environment. The interrelationship between school culture, school climate, and student wellbeing in vocational education is illustrated in Figure 1.

Applying this conceptual framework, the empirical analysis explores how the experiences and practices of vocational schoolteachers and support staff align with the elements of school culture and climate. Additionally, it examines how these dynamics shape the overall school environment and, more specifically, how fostering a positive school culture contributes to student wellbeing in vocational schools.

Methodology

This study is based on data from focus group interviews with vocational teachers and support staff conducted as part of a training program titled "Designing a Learning Environment That Supports Students' Mental Health and Well-Being in Vocational Education Institutions." The training program aimed to gain insights into how vocational schools can effectively support the wellbeing of young people and formed a component of the broader research project "X." The training took place from February to April 2023. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants who demonstrated a specific interest in student wellbeing and who actively work with vocational school students in their daily practice. Only vocational teachers and support staff who expressed interest in the training program and its theme were eligible to participate. Invitations to the training were disseminated through professional networks and vocational school e-mailing lists. This intentional sampling approach aimed to include individuals who were likely to provide relevant insights into the research. While the study focuses exclusively on the perspectives of vocational school teachers and support staff, this was a deliberate choice. These professionals are often the first-line actors in recognizing and responding to students' wellbeing needs. The exclusion of students and school management reflects the scope and design of the training program from which the participants were drawn. Nevertheless, their absence narrows the range of perspectives and represents a limitation that should be addressed in future studies.

To investigate participants' perceptions and experiences regarding student wellbeing and school practices, semi-structured focus group
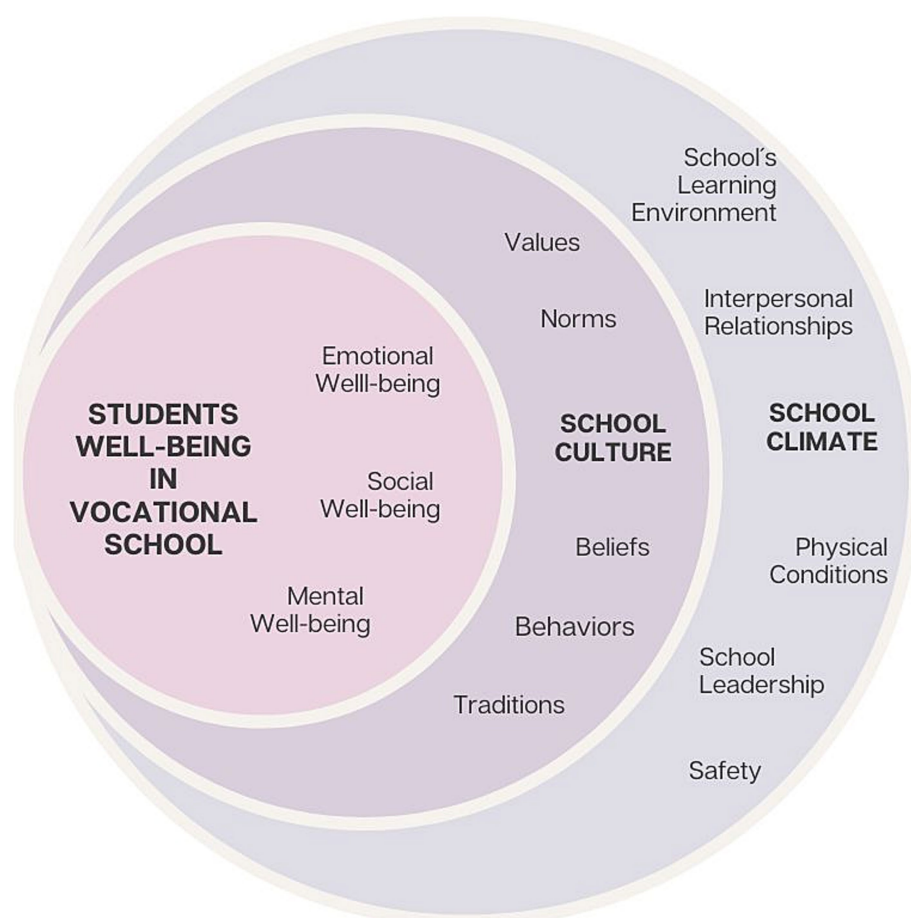

FIGURE 1
The interrelationship between school culture, school climate, and student wellbeing in vocational education.

interviews were conducted. A total of 16 participants, including social pedagogues, vocational teachers, educational technologists, and other support specialists from vocational schools across Estonia, participated in four focus groups. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was reached, meaning no new themes emerged from additional data. Each group interview lasted 30–40 min, was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and systematically coded for thematic analysis. Ethical research practices were followed, with informed consent obtained from all participants prior to the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the intended use of the data, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. The sample size of 16 participants is considered sufficient for thematic saturation, as no new insights emerged after conducting the four focus groups. To support the adequacy of the sample size, saturation grids were used as recommended in qualitative research methodology (Guest et al., 2006; Fusch and Ness, 2015), indicating the point at which data collection can be concluded due to data redundancy.

This study employed a hybrid analytical approach, beginning with inductive text-based analysis followed by thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The thematic analysis consisted of six stages–(1) Become familiar with the data; (2) Generate initial codes; (3) Search for themes; (4) Review themes; (5) Define themes; (6) Writing up (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). First, the transcribed interview texts were read thoroughly, and initial notes were made. This was followed by text-based coding based on the research questions, where each meaningful thought unit was given a label as close as possible to the original text. The systematic coding focused on themes related to supporting young people's wellbeing within vocational schools. Our research centered on teachers' and support staff's perceptions and experiences regarding their roles in enhancing student wellbeing and the practices they have implemented to support it. While the analysis began with inductive coding, a deductive approach was applied in the later stages. School climate and school culture served as conceptual frameworks to guide a more focused interpretation of the patterns emerging from the data. By linking these elements to student wellbeing, we gained a more nuanced understanding of how school culture and climate may influence the wellbeing of students in vocational schools.

In the next stage, the interview texts and the initial codes were reviewed, and thematic categories were formulated. During this phase, several patterns related to elements of school culture and climate began to emerge. The code tree developed during the process served as a foundation for analyzing subsequent interviews, providing a consistent framework for assigning each meaningful unit to an appropriate category or code. As the analysis progressed, the initial codes (Table A1) were grouped and refined into three overarching thematic categories: the dual role of teachers, the role of school leaders, and activities and traditions that support students' wellbeing. These categories reflect the main dimensions through which participants described their practices and perceptions related to supporting student wellbeing in vocational schools.

The findings are supported by interview quotes that illustrate the themes. To ensure confidentiality, vocational teachers' names are replaced with identifiers (e.g., EG1Õ1, EG1Õ2, PG2Õ2).

Findings

The following section outlines the experiences, challenges and perceptions faced by vocational teachers and support staff in Estonia regarding the support of students' wellbeing in vocational schools. In line with the research questions, the findings are presented under three main topics: The Dual Role of Teachers in Supporting Students, The Role of School Leaders (School Management) in Shaping the School Environment to Promote Student Well-Being, and Inclusive Activities and Traditions that Support Students' Well-Being in Vocational Schools.

The dual role of the teachers in supporting students

According to focus group interviews, teachers see their role as multifaceted and important for supporting the well-being of students in vocational school. They understand that in addition to imparting subject-specific knowledge, they are the first point of contact for students at school. This position enables them to build trusting relationships with students. Interview participants emphasized that teachers should be the ones who notice when something is wrong with a young person at vocational school.

"Students often perceive us as someone they can trust. And if you can create that situation there, where they open up and if they don't want to go to the school counselor, I often take aside those young people who are afraid to ask... I see the role of the teacher who has created a trust relationship with the student as very significant… the teacher even has some advantages like between parents and child who also have responsibility, right, the child is afraid to talk, immediately there will be some trouble or misunderstanding, but if the teacher is aware of this, then they could help by referring them to someone. For students, a psychologist is often intimidating." (EG2Õ2)

According to participants the trust between teachers and students has an important part in supporting student wellbeing. Teachers who establish strong, trusting relationships with their students may provide significant emotional support, at times even surpassing the role of parents or school counselors, as students may feel more comfortable and less judged by teachers.

"I feel that now I have the peace to listen to the students' concerns, no matter how sad or problematic they may be, and I dare to listen to them. Earlier, however, I realized that perhaps I was not ready to listen to them. On one hand, the workload now allows me time for them, but I should not become a psychologist; that means I must not step outside my limits. I see a lot in the case of my colleagues how the role of a psychologist is actually fulfilled, but it leads to trouble, and it must not be abused either, precisely the ethical boundaries." (EG2Õ3)

While teachers recognize that responding and listening to students' concerns is important for supporting their wellbeing, they also highlight the importance of involving a professional counselor or psychologist when necessary. This distinction is essential for preventing emotional burnout and maintaining a clear division of responsibilities within the school environment. There are vocational teachers who view themselves not only as transmitters of knowledge but also as trusted contacts for students, enabling them to create safe

and supportive environments for open dialogue. In the interviews, some schools were described as having weaker collaboration and communication, leading to situations where teachers struggle to maintain boundaries and feel overwhelmed by the dual expectations placed upon them.

> "I have had students come to tell me their personal stories, in a way I am flattered that they trust me, tell me that their parents are getting divorced, their mother drinks too much alcohol and they ask what they should do, but what advice should I give, or could I give them, pedagogically?... I can't recommend anything in my opinion, for example, tell him that I would do this or that in your place. But there have been cases where I have been able to save some students who wanted to leave vocational school at all. (EG3Õ3)

According to teachers and support staff, it is important for educators to recognize early signs when students show signs of struggling. Also, by understanding students' fears of seeking professional help, teachers can help them overcome obstacles. Based on the interviews, it is suggested that teachers should be mindful of their limitations and avoid assuming roles, such as that of a psychologist, for which they are not trained. In their opinion, maintaining ethical boundaries and referring students to appropriate support services, when needed, can help teachers effectively support students during challenging times and keep them engaged in their vocational education. The school's daily processes influence how effectively student wellbeing is supported. In the interviews, it was highlighted that some schools, lacking adequate support staff or flexible systems, struggled to provide necessary assistance.

> "In Estonia, there is a national shortage of support staff in vocational schools. Actually, it doesn't matter which institution you go to in Estonia, it can be a general education institution, a preschool or a vocational school, there are simply not enough employees to support students." (EG4Õ2)

Interviews indicate that supporting staff in vocational schools is very necessary for helping students with various challenges. However, when the demand for assistance exceeds the available staff, significant issues arise.

> One participant commented: "I am both a support specialist and I am a teacher. This means that I perform both roles, and sometimes it can overlap. However, these roles are different. Perhaps I have now acquired more skills that I can apply to meet the needs of the students.
>
> In school, being the link between students and teachers, I can contribute to ensuring that teachers feel important. Sometimes we don't feel that teachers feel involved enough." (PG2Õ2)

Participants emphasized the need for adequate resources and staffing to effectively support students, but the current situation shows these resources are limited. Vocational teachers often feel they are in a dual role, acting both as educators and counselors, which can be overwhelming, especially when professional counselors are lacking.

> "And actually, where we ourselves as support staff, when we work, we must not forget ourselves, because burnout happens imperceptibly... The Ministry of Education should value support specialists more in vocational schools, and create more working positions, if possible, because we should be able to support each other in terms of burnout. It's like walking on very, very thin ice. "(EG4Õ1)

> "In this work, it is this sense of mission that carries forward" (EG4Õ3)

According to the interviews, most of the vocational teachers and support staff recognize their responsibility to provide guidance and support to students facing various challenges. However, they acknowledge that the shortage of support staff across Estonia limits their ability to assist all students effectively. In addition, there are vocational teachers who see their role as more than just imparting academic knowledge, they feel a deep personal commitment to supporting students' overall development. This "sense of mission" highlights the emotional and ethical dedication that teachers bring to their work, often extending beyond their formal duties. Teachers with a strong sense of mission are not just focused on academic outcomes but also on nurturing students' personal growth. However, participants were also of the opinion that when this sense of mission is not supported by school leadership (management), it can lead to burnout or frustration, as teachers feel they are carrying a heavy burden without sufficient institutional support.

The study emphasized that effective cooperation between teachers and support staff is important and necessary to ensure student wellbeing and academic success, as argued by one if the participant:

> "...significantly more attention should be given to young people with school problems like absences and falling behind. Teachers should inform vocational group leaders, who will direct support staff to monitor the student. This shared responsibility of teachers, vocational school group leaders, and support staff must be addressed promptly". (PG3Õ1)

The quote underscores the need for collaboration among teachers, vocational school group leaders,[2] and support staff in addressing students' challenges, such as absences and academic difficulties. Participants expressed the opinion that open communication and shared responsibility within the school are very important and should be addressed promptly.

On the other hand, in some vocational schools, the language barrier faced by support staff can significantly impact the effectiveness of student support services. One of the participants highlighted this issue by sharing their experience:

> "We have a social pedagogue from Ukraine employed at our vocational school who does not understand Estonian at all. But half of our school is made up of Estonian students, and I asked at work

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2 A vocational school group leader is an educational professional responsible for overseeing and guiding a specific group of students within a vocational education setting.

how Estonian young people get support if the support specialist doesn't speak any Estonian? And well, it turns out that they can't get any..." (PG3Õ2)

This quote highlights the challenges that arise when the language skills of support staff do not align with the linguistic needs of students. Language barriers can obstruct effective communication and limit the assistance available to students, underscoring the need for schools to ensure that support staff have the necessary language skills to meet the diverse needs of the student population. This situation emphasizes the importance of inclusion and adaptability in the educational environment.

The role of school leaders (school management) in shaping the school environment to support student wellbeing

Teacher professional development and training are necessary to keep teachers up to date with the latest educational practices. However, there are challenges associated with encouraging experienced teachers to participate in such training. One participant shared their observations on this issue:

"Those who have been teaching for years without any training, they do listen to what you have to say about this topic (topic: supporting students wellbeing in vocational school), but they are not interested, because, they know that changes mean they have to start changing themselves, which doesn't suit them, and at the same time, you see, it is very complicated to change things in school environment, as well." (PG1Õ3)

This quote refers to some experienced teachers showing resistance to professional development in this area. Interviews suggested that although they may recognize the importance of supporting student wellbeing, the prospect of changing long-standing practices may be difficult for them as it requires them to step out of their comfort zone. In addition, some had an opinion that if the school management does not support this idea (supporting students wellbeing in vocational school) or does not consider it important enough to bring it up to the teachers and staff, then it becomes difficult to create a school-wide culture of prioritizing this topic. Without clear leadership on this matter, teachers may not feel motivated to actively engage in professional development related to student wellbeing, and it can lead to a fragmented approach where only a few teachers take initiative, leaving the broader school community disconnected. Therefore, the resistance of some teachers or staff indicates that implementing changes in a school can be difficult if it is not driven at the leadership level and clearly communicated to all.

"...Different generations within the vocational school give an indication that people who have been working in the same school, in the same position, for a very long time have a certain comfort zone. Any kind of innovation initially causes protest, and therefore the older generation cannot be included. In the end, if you force them, their mental health suffers when they must do things against

their will. Yes, up to a certain point, you just have to let them be." (PG2Õ3)

This quote illustrates the challenges of implementing new practices in a vocational school environment where there are significant generational differences among staff. Long-term employees can develop a comfort zone that makes them resistant to change.

"Let's say that there have been some clashes with older colleagues in our vocational school, for example they have argued that it's been done this way for a thousand years, basically, these students are like snowflakes, you know, older colleagues also have this attitude... but since we have a new school leader, I gradually see new directions and new ways of thinking, this situation in school is now getting better." (PG1Õ2)

Innovations and new approaches may initially be met with protest from the older generation, who may find it difficult to adapt. Forcing these staff members to change against their will can negatively impact on their mental health, leading to increased stress and dissatisfaction. It emerged from the interviews that there is an opinion that the role of vocational school leaders, their decisions and leadership styles significantly shape the general culture and environment of the school. And therefore, it was noted that the vocational school leaders have an important role in supporting student wellbeing, as well: *"And the organization also has so much influence on that, the environment, and how much I as a person can do there if I'm not a leader."* (PG4Õ1) This statement emphasizes the impact of school culture and leadership on individual outcomes in vocational school. In a school with effective cooperation and strong leadership, teachers may also effectively support their students. Interviews revealed that some vocational schools are actively considering ways to improve the wellbeing of their students, recognizing the importance of mental health and supportive practices; however, this commitment can vary significantly from school to school.

"I can say that among our teachers, it is perceived that this is a problem among youth (mental health issues), and it is not just some passing trend among young people." (PG2Õ4)

These quotes illustrate several key points about the challenges and opportunities of addressing mental health in schools. There is a clear understanding among some teachers that mental health issues are a significant concern for students, not just a passing trend.

"...I even had a student at our vocational school who actually came and asked why we talk so little about mental health in our school, which means we really don't know what young people are talking about." (PG2Õ3)

"Noticing and perhaps the skill to notice... most of them want to communicate. Maybe that's the issue, I see some students sitting in the dorm all the time, on their computers… the electricity bill is also such that… since I also handle bills on the dormitory side, I see that they live only on the internet and don't even notice when someone walks in. So maybe we should pay more attention to such things." (PG1Õ4)

These quotes highlight significant gaps in awareness and communication regarding students' wellbeing and mental health within the vocational school. One of the quotes emphasizes a student's observation about the lack of discussion surrounding mental health issues, suggesting that both educators and support staff may not fully grasp the concerns and conversations relevant to young people today. This indicates a need for increased awareness of and education about mental health topics among school personnel to better understand and support students.

This concern about students' social engagement and wellbeing highlights how essential schools are in creating an inclusive environment that fosters social connections and mental health awareness. Interviews revealed that when students spend excessive time isolated in their dormitories, often absorbed in internet activities, it indicates a potential gap in the school's ability to encourage interaction and detect signs of emotional distress. Participants suggested that schools need to ensure staff are adequately trained and supported to recognize early signs of disengagement and mental health issues. Without such proactive measures, students may lack the necessary support for their academic and personal success, highlighting the school's responsibility in building a supportive and attentive community.

On the other hand, vocational school staff (teachers and support staff) emphasized in their interviews that school leadership should also invest in and consider the wellbeing and mental health of staff within the vocational school environment.

> One participant shared, "*Our mental health is also not good; we would wish to be more included in decision-making processes, but they only do it superficially and don't really involve us*" (PG2Õ4).

This statement highlights a significant concern regarding the wellbeing of vocational school staff. In the interviews, it was mentioned that the school leadership is not supportive. One of the participants said the following: "*I feel like I either have to educate myself to become a leader or choose a new school with a new leader because things do not seem to work any other way in vocational schools. I do not even understand where the school values are…*" (PG2Õ2).

From this statement, it can be concluded that there may be a sense of frustration with the leadership (school management) in vocational schools. The individual feels a lack of support and clear direction, suggesting that leadership may not be effectively fostering a positive school culture or providing the necessary resources for professional growth. Interviews also revealed that according to vocational school staff, there is a need for school leadership that focuses on establishing clear values, providing professional development opportunities, and ensuring that the school environment is supportive for both staff and students.

Furthermore, interviews with vocational school staff brought out several areas where teachers and support staff feel excluded from important decision-making processes. Many participants expressed frustration over not being involved in discussions about vocational school values, strategic planning, which creates a sense of disconnection from the school's direction. There is also a perceived lack of inclusion when it comes to initiatives aimed at supporting student wellbeing, with staff feeling that their insights and expertise are often overlooked.

Additionally, participants emphasize that the mental health and wellbeing of staff are often overlooked, which can result in burnout, decreased motivation, and ultimately a negative impact on the quality of support provided to students.

Inclusive activities and traditions that support students' wellbeing in vocational schools

The study intended to identify good practices and methods used by vocational schools to support student wellbeing. However, the results revealed that such practices or methods are often used infrequently and by only a small number of vocational schools in Estonia. While vocational schools employ various ideas to promote wellbeing, their implementation tends to be inconsistent and limited. One notable practice in one vocational school is the orientation camp for first-year students, a tradition that has been going on for nearly 5 years at one vocational school. It is a two-day camp, including spending the night on tourist farms. According to the teachers, it has helped the students to quickly and safely adapt to the school environment. During camp, vocational school group leaders,[3] teachers and support staff work together to help freshmen overcome initial fears.

Another participant shared her perspective on how regular events, celebrations, and community-building practices contribute to creating a supportive and welcoming environment at their school. She mentioned the following: "*Our school's regular events, celebrations, and community-building practices help to create a welcoming and supportive environment. We have thoughtfully integrated these traditions into the school year, and they provide opportunities for students to engage with their peers and teachers, which, in our opinion, strengthens the overall sense of community.*" (PG4Õ2).

In addition, it was also pointed out that in one vocational school, inclusive activities such as group projects, cooperative lessons and peer tutoring have become central to fostering a sense of community. These activities are designed to engage students in teamwork and encourage them to develop essential skills such as communication, problem-solving, and self-regulation – skills that are important to their personal and professional growth.

One school emphasizes individualized support through mentorship and counseling programs. Students can participate in one-on-one mentoring sessions, where they can discuss personal challenges, career aspirations, and academic goals. This support system is designed to help students build resilience, manage stress, and develop confidence in their ability to succeed academically and in their future careers.

Inclusive activities such as games and evening campfire talks foster strong social interactions, helping students build new friendships and feel more connected to their school community. These experiences boost students' confidence, making it easier for them to

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3 A vocational school group leader is an educational professional responsible for overseeing and guiding a specific group of students within a vocational education setting.

return to school. Additionally, teachers and support staff agree that induction traditions, such as "icebreaker" activities, are necessary in helping both new students and staff feel welcomed and integrated into the school environment. In addition, according to teachers the positive effect of these camps is evident, as the students participating in them show greater cohesion and self-confidence. However, the two-year hiatus due to the COVID-19 lockdown highlighted the challenges and disparities faced by students who missed out on that experience. Their experiences have shown that without the camp it is more difficult for teachers to achieve the same positive results in regular classes.

> As one teacher explains, "*For the past five years, we've had a tradition of a two-day freshman orientation camp, including an overnight stay at tourist farms. This camp, which helps students adapt quickly and safely, was canceled for the last two years due to COVID-19. The camp includes group leaders, teachers, and support staff who help freshmen overcome their initial fears. After the camp, students feel more confident and connected, greeting everyone and forming new friendships through activities like games and evening bonfire talks. The absence of the camp for two years has clearly affected the cohesion and confidence of the students. Teachers also find it difficult to achieve the same positive results in regular classes as they did during the camp.*" (PG3Õ3)

In the interviews, the importance of a physical environment that supports wellbeing was highlighted as an important component. Creating a healthy, safe and inclusive physical environment was considered important for promoting mental health. Some of the support specialists brought out their plan to create a space for vocational school group leaders that would provide a very comfortable and pleasant environment. They envision having bean bag chairs where they can sit and relax while discussing world affairs. They emphasized that such a physical environment should support comfort and safety, ultimately fostering better communication and student wellbeing in the classroom.

> As one teacher explains, *"I would like to create a room for the group leader and the students with a very comfortable and pleasant environment. There could be beanbag chairs where you can sit and relax and talk about the world. In a regular classroom, where the teacher talks and students listen, it doesn't give the same feeling."* (PG1Õ2)

This quote shows a teacher's desire to create a space that goes beyond the traditional classroom setup, aiming instead for an environment that fosters open dialogue, comfort, and emotional connection. Traditional classrooms, focused on academic structure, may lack flexibility for informal, supportive interactions. Such a classroom would encourage students to share their thoughts openly, which could promote social wellbeing and trust within the group.

Another perspective raised by participants from vocational schools was the need for a more comprehensive focus on mental health within the curriculum or through dedicated subjects. One participant mentioned that such a curriculum was only present in one of the vocational schools in Estonia. Participants pointed out that integrating regular discussions about mental health could have an important part in creating a more supportive and understanding

school environment. In their opinion and experience, by including these topics, students would not only feel more supported but also develop better emotional strength, which is essential for managing stress and overall wellbeing. Furthermore, equipping students with practical tools to handle mental health challenges would benefit them both during their studies and in their future careers, where mental health and stress management are increasingly important.

Discussion and conclusion

The study's findings indicated that the understanding of the role of supporting students' wellbeing in vocational schools in Estonia can vary significantly from one institution to another. Educators perceive themselves as playing a broader role in recognizing the importance of addressing students' emotional and mental health needs alongside their academic development. The analysis highlights that teachers' ability to support student wellbeing is closely tied to their own wellbeing, professional conditions, and access to systemic support. Teachers and support staff experience significant demands in their roles, while also facing structural constraints such as staff shortages and resource limitations. According to the interviews, some vocational teachers actively invest in the wellbeing of students, and they view themselves not only as knowledge transmitters, but also as trusted contacts for their students. Therefore, they see themselves in a dual role. The same study results were highlighted in the study in the year 2018, one person in a school often fulfills multiple roles (Haaristo and Kirss, 2018). For instance, a group supervisor or teacher may take on the responsibilities of a social pedagogue, even if they lack formal qualifications in social pedagogy.

The presence of burnout risk, heavy workload, and everyday challenges shows that teachers are expected to do a lot, but they may not always have enough energy or support to manage it in a healthy way. Despite these challenges, many teachers still feel that their work is meaningful and rewarding, and they stay motivated from within. However, this inner motivation alone is not enough to keep them going in the long run. A positive school culture is reflected in teachers' professional commitment, ethical orientation, and their willingness to support students – elements evident in codes such as Sustaining Sense of Mission, Professional Satisfaction, and Teacher Ethical Boundaries (Cohen et al., 2009; Schein, 2004). Complementing this, Hoy and Tarter's concept of Academic Optimism emphasizes that teachers' trust in students, sense of efficacy, and belief in the value of their work are core components of a positive school climate that fosters student success (Hoy et al., 2006. p. 426; McGuigan and Hoy, 2006).

In the study participants also highlighted systemic challenges such as Resource Limitations in Schools and the National Shortage of Support Staff indicating that cultural values do not always translate into consistent and effective practice. Another important issue is that many vocational schools in Estonia still lack proper access to mental health and support services. Teachers reported that they do not always have clear guidance or enough training to recognize and respond to students' mental health needs.

Although wellbeing strategies are becoming more accepted, skepticism and limited awareness among staff remain challenges. To address this, teachers should receive appropriate training with clear guidance and practical tools for identifying and responding to students' mental health needs. Developing targeted professional development

modules such as training based on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) principles adapted specifically for VET personnel could strengthen staff capacity to support students' emotional wellbeing more effectively.

In addition, the lack of support staff and limited resources in schools mean that teachers often carry too much responsibility for student wellbeing. Although they are willing to help students, they need better support from the school system and their colleagues to do it well. The findings also align with theories of school culture and school climate, as examined in various studies (Stanton et al., 2016; Awartani et al., 2008). These perspectives emphasize the significance of both value-based leadership and everyday interpersonal dynamics in shaping a positive and supportive school environment. Therefore, vocational schools should create structured support systems that integrate mental health services into daily school life, ensuring students know where to seek help. Vocational school leaders should promote campaigns to emphasize the importance of mental wellbeing and foster a school culture where mental health is prioritized alongside physical health. Furthermore, this topic should be represented as a subject in vocational school curricula, ensuring that students are equipped with the knowledge and tools to understand and manage mental health issues.

The second research question in the study aimed to identify the practices of teachers and support staff that are related to elements of positive school culture and school climate to promote student wellbeing in vocational schools. The results revealed that practices specifically designed to support student wellbeing and mental health are rarely implemented in Estonian vocational schools. When such practices are applied, their implementation is often inconsistent and limited to only a few institutions. However, some vocational schools introduced inclusive practices to strengthen student cohesion and personal development. For example, one school organized a camp for first-year students, which teachers noted improved students' social skills, self-confidence, and sense of belonging. Group projects, cooperative lessons, and peer tutoring were also highlighted as important methods for fostering teamwork and developing essential skills such as communication, problem-solving, and self-regulation.

These activities also support students' emotional wellbeing and social integration, and, in terms of school climate, are also considered important aspects and values in developing a positive school culture in a vocational school (Durlak et al., 2015; Ismail et al., 2022). These activities are important for building a supportive environment where everyone feels valued. Existing literature highlights the importance of social–emotional competencies in general education (Durlak et al., 2015), yet few studies address how these principles translate into VET contexts. This study contributes by illustrating how VET-specific SEL training could respond to the distinct emotional demands vocational teachers face.

In addition to that, the results show that time and wider events influence how school culture and climate develop. For example, during the two-year break caused by the COVID-19 lockdown, important activities like first-year student camps could not take place. Teachers noticed that without it, it was harder to create the same sense of unity in regular classes. This suggests that Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem could be a useful lens for interpreting how wider social events, like the COVID-19 lockdown, influence school life and students' experiences over time (Guy-Evans, 2024).

According to study, induction traditions, such as "icebreaker" activities, help new students integrate into the school community, foster a supportive environment for open communication and strong relationships. Encouraging collaboration among teachers, students,

and staff strengthens school culture by reducing social isolation and promoting mutual respect. Creating safe, accessible learning spaces is also key to supporting students' academic and social success, as highlighted by Cohen et al. (2009) and Barker et al. (2023).

On the other hand, the study also found that vocational schools face significant internal challenges that hinder their ability to create a supportive environment and promote students' wellbeing. From the perspective of school climate, the data reveal considerable concerns related to workload and emotional strain, seen in codes like Workload and Stress and Burnout Risk Awareness. These results show the need for a school environment that supports and safeguards teachers' mental and emotional wellbeing (National School Climate Center, 2024; Rhodes et al., 2011). In addition, internal challenges such as ineffective communication and limited leadership involvement were found to conflict with the principles of positive school culture (Rhodes et al., 2011; Barnett and McCormick, 2004; Turan and Bektas, 2013; Jessiman et al., 2022). Interview data revealed that communication between vocational school staff and management was often insufficient, which hindered collaboration and reduced staff involvement in decision-making. For instance, some vocational schools did not prioritize students' wellbeing, and there were instances where the school management disregarded suggestions from employees on this issue. At the same time, the overall school environment is affected by this lack of open communication and staff engagement. When teachers feel excluded from major decisions, it weakens their sense of belonging and collective responsibility, which are essential for a positive school climate, as highlighted by Vandana and Anubhuti (2019). It was also emphasized that teachers often operate independently, without adequate systemic support or coordinated guidance in this topic. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that, in the absence of strong institutional leadership or collaborative structures, individual staff members may carry a disproportionate burden in supporting student wellbeing (Hargreaves, 2000, p.165) While prior research (e.g., Cohen et al., 2009) emphasizes the central role of leadership in fostering school climate, the present findings suggest that in vocational settings, staff wellbeing efforts often evolve despite limited leadership engagement. This raises questions about how support structures can be sustained without strong top-down guidance.

According to another research (Oppi et al., 2020), hierarchical structures often limit teachers' involvement in leadership. This issue is prevalent in many schools where communication between staff and management is ineffective and without effective leadership and good communication, schools face challenges in addressing students' needs, which hinders the creation of an environment where both teachers and students can thrive (Oppi et al., 2020). In addition, the limited involvement of vocational school staff in leadership and decision-making, as highlighted in the interviews, also aligns with critiques posed by distributed leadership theory (Spillane, 2005), which argues that sustainable school improvement relies on leadership practices distributed across various actors. The findings align with Complexity Leadership Theory (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007), which highlights the need for leadership in schools to go beyond administrative control and foster adaptive and collaborative processes. Complexity Leadership Theory (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) argues that leadership in complex environments such as schools – should not solely focus on hierarchy and administrative control but should also facilitate adaptability, collaboration, and innovation. In cases where leadership restricts communication and participation, schools may struggle to address students' evolving needs effectively. Moreover, inclusive decision-making enhances staff wellbeing, strengthens a positive

school climate, and fosters innovation, ultimately benefiting both educators and students. By creating open communication channels and encouraging shared leadership, schools can develop sustainable support systems that respond proactively to challenges, ensuring a more effective and responsive learning environment for all stakeholders.

Limitations, implications and future directions

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of school culture and climate in supporting student wellbeing in vocational schools, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. Firstly, the sample includes vocational schools from different regions, but not all areas were represented, which may restrict the generalizability of the results to other types of schools or regions. Secondly, the study relies on qualitative data collected primarily through interviews with teachers and support staff, which, although rich in detail, may not fully capture the complexity of student experiences or the broader institutional context. Additionally, it is likely that teachers and support staff who participated in this study were those with a particular interest in the topic, which, while valuable, also means they shared their views based on their unique perspectives and experiences within their schools. Data collection took place during a period of post-pandemic recovery, a factor that may have impacted school dynamics and communication practices.

Future research could expand on the findings of this study in several ways. To address the geographic and institutional diversity limitations, future studies could include a more representative sample, encompassing a wider range of schools from various regions and types. This would facilitate a broader understanding of how cultural and structural factors influence student wellbeing across diverse educational settings. Moreover, integrating a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews could provide a more comprehensive view of the relationship between school culture and student wellbeing. This could allow researchers to capture broad trends through quantitative data while also exploring the deeper, more nuanced experiences of students and staff.

In addition, there is potential for future studies to explore digital interventions aimed at improving student wellbeing. These could include mobile applications for mental health monitoring, online counseling, or peer-support platforms. Investigating such digital solutions would be valuable in understanding how technology can be integrated into existing school cultures to support students more flexibly and effectively. Another important direction for future research would be to evaluate leadership development programs for school leaders, focusing on enhancing their capacity to foster supportive, inclusive school culture. Finally, research could examine the impact of social and emotional learning (SEL) programs, specifically tailored for vocational education settings, to assess how these programs could enhance both staff and student wellbeing.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The requirement of ethical approval was waived by Ethics Committee of Tallinn University for the studies involving humans because Ethics Committee of Tallinn University. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

IB: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MÜ: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. KL: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. TV: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft.

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Appendix

TABLE A1 Schematic code tree.

Topic	Category	Code
The dual role of the teachers in supporting students	Teachers' wellbeing and support systems	Emotional Support for Teachers
	Role conflict awareness	Expectations versus Reality
		Relationship Dynamics
	Burnout risk awareness	Workload and Stress
		Workplace Challenges
	Sustaining sense of mission	Professional Satisfaction
		Motivation Sources
	Teacher ethical boundaries	Professional Conduct
		Student Relationship Balance
	National shortage of support staff	Resource Limitations in Schools
		Possible Solutions
The role of school leaders in shaping the school environment to support student wellbeing	Resistance to change in comfort zones	Resistance from Senior Staff/Teachers
		Attachment to Familiar Routines
	Leadership-driven renewal	Continuous Improvement
		Strengthening Relationships Between Leadership and Staff
	Organizational limits on teacher actions	Insufficient Access to Mental Health and Student Support Services
		Hierarchical Decision-Making Affecting Teacher Initiative
		Collaboration Barriers
	Managing tolerance thresholds for wellbeing initiatives and lack of staff awareness on mental health issues	Institutional Acceptance of Wellbeing Strategies
		Awareness and Training for Recognizing Student Needs
		Overcoming Skepticism Toward Mental Health Initiatives
		Absence of Clear Guidelines for Supporting Students' Mental Health
Inclusive activities and traditions that support students' wellbeing in vocational schools	Inclusive practices and support measures	Encouraging Inclusive School Events and Traditions (Orientation Camps)
	Language accessibility	Accessible Mental Health and Counseling Support
		Language problems among students and staff
	Induction traditions and orientation support	"Icebreaker" Activities
	Creating a supportive environment	Encouraging Open Communication and Collaboration
		Addressing Social Isolation
		Safe and Accessible Learning Spaces