

Vocational Education Practices for Empowerment of Vulnerable Students in Lithuania and Latvia: The Pedagogical and Institutional Factors

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Abstract

This article aims to describe the institutional and pedagogical factors of vocational education and training (VET) provider practices targeted to empower vulnerable students to learn and be employed in Lithuania and Latvia. The research methodology and design are based on the comparative study approach involving desk research, case studies and by applying focus group interviews with representatives of the VET institutions' teaching, support and administrative staff. The research revealed the central role of VET teachers and other teaching staff members in empowering at-risk VET students, as well as the issue of staffing levels and building capacity needs when empowering an increasing volume of at-risk students in VET schools. These schools seek to empower students by abandoning standardization and the narrow specialization of skills and increasing the use of the individual approach in pedagogical practices. Emphasis is placed on expanding the scope and individualization of the applied pedagogical practices for at-risk students. Increased attention is being paid to the living conditions of at-risk students outside school; addressing students' social problems, the development of key skills and attitudes, coaching and methods of individual co-operation.

1. Introduction

The social inclusion of young people is a high-level priority of the European Union (EU) and simultaneously, a challenge. This is particularly relevant with respect to VET students who are subject to various risk factors that may result in them dropping out of formal education. Notably, social exclusion and poverty among young people has increased during the economic crisis of the previous decade, as well as in relation to the additional factor, the Covid pandemic. In Europe, 2022 had been announced as the European Year of Youth, and 2023 was promoted as the European Year of Skills (European Commission, 2022; European Youth Portal, 2022). This clearly indicated the priorities the world of education and employment needed to address and where additional research in particular was required. The EU Youth Strategy (EU Youth Portal, 2022) specifically aims to create more and equal opportunities for all young people to be able to participate in education and the labour market to support active citizenship, social inclusion and solidarity of all young people. This requires the full potential of VET and

employment institutions to be realized as a means of inclusion, encouraging a cross-sector approach to address exclusion, as well as to promote access to quality services, e.g. transport, e-inclusion, health, and social services. It is already universally acknowledged that vocational education is an important stepping stone for many students, providing them with the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in their chosen careers. However, some vocational education students may be considered vulnerable due to a range of factors, including socioeconomic status and previous educational experiences. These vulnerabilities can impact their academic performance and overall well-being, highlighting the need for preventative and support measures (Cefai et al., 2022; Ferreira et al., 2020).

The socioeconomic, social and other risks among VET students in the Baltic countries are a recognised challenge (Tütlys et al., 2022). The vulnerability of these students in Lithuania is well illustrated by the number of dropouts from the VET schools. According to the National Audit Office, in 2015–2016 15.38% of VET learners dropped out, in 2016–2017 – 19.1%, and in 2017–2018 – 16.7%. A larger share of dropouts is observed in small VET schools (up to 300 learners). Over the past three years, 19.4% of learners dropped out of small VET institutions (up to 300 learners), 18% of learners dropped out of medium VET institutions (301-1,000 learners), and 14.7% of learners dropped out of large VET institutions.

Table 1 Reasons for dropping out of VET schools in Lithuania

| Reason | % |
|-------------------------------|-------|
| Illness | 1.05 |
| Difficult material conditions | 1.7 |
| Parenting duties | 1.58 |
| Change of living place | 3.66 |
| Change of school | 8.22 |
| Academic failure | 11.16 |
| Employment | 12.04 |
| Emigration | 13.02 |
| Non-attendance of lessons | 17.87 |
| “Other reasons” | 29.7 |

Source: National Audit Office (2020), data on VET institutions

As seen from the data of the National Audit Office (Table 1), in the period between 2011–2020 the dropout rate from VET due to academic failure decreased. The share of those who left school due to academic failure in the overall dropout structure has decreased from 13% to 7%. A total of 3% to 8% of VET students each year move to another general education or VET institution. Most students drop out of schools due to “other reasons” (from 80 to 90% in the decade). These reasons may be various: difficult financial situation of the family, relocation, personal or family reasons, etc.), moving abroad (to live and/or work), lack of motivation to learn and employment. As it is stated in the report of the National Audit Office (National Audit Office, 2020), ensuring learning opportunities for persons from an unfavourable socio-economic environment or those with special needs is still a challenge (National Audit Office, 2020).

The situation in Latvia is rather similar. Although early school leaving rates have been decreasing in the last decade – from 11.6% in 2011 to 7.7% in 2021 (European Commission 2022), this remains an important challenge for the VET system, especially when considering the growing demand of VET graduates in the labour market. The Covid-19 pandemic also severely impacted VET provision and increased the vulnerability of the learners with lower access to ICT and online learning solutions (Maslo et al, 2023).

The literature highlights the importance of understanding the different factors of vulnerability among VET students. For example, dropout can involve a broad range of motives and factors and is not a standalone event, where students and schools are treated as performers of defined functions (Nielsen, 2016). The idea of a critical capabilities account within VET, pays attention to the potential of VET for the sustainable empowerment of learners and societies in general, to deal with the challenges of poverty, social exclusion, and deprivation of rights (McGrath et al., 2022). Implementation of the pedagogical practices directed towards the empowerment and retention of vulnerable VET students, and prevention of their dropping out, also involves the important role of caring work and emotional practices management. These can contribute to the successful integration of vulnerable students or prevent different obstacles and restraints caused by the institutionalization and professionalization of care practices (Lippke, 2012). On the national level, insufficient or inadequate institutional support for the vulnerable learners in VET, requires as compensation, a more inter-personal approach and engagement from teachers when supporting students (Phuthi and Mazarire, 2022).

However, increasing access to VET for specific groups of vulnerable learners, that suffer from social exclusion, like migrant workers and refugees, also involves the development and application of a variety of specific pedagogical practices (Scharnhorst and Kammermann, 2020). Seeking to transform VET into an instrument of social integration for vulnerable youth often requires the application of different practices and positive

discrimination approaches to tackle the educational problems of low-skilled and unskilled groups of learners. This often creates the risks related to the loss of motivation from the employers' side, to engage in VET and other social partners viewing VET mainly as a means for the development of human capital for the market economy (Aerne and Bonoli, 2023). To avoid such risks, governments in some countries tend to provide various, specific VET measures for the different groups of vulnerable learners, like refugees functioning outside the VET system itself, and by making these measures invisible to key stakeholders to reduce their dissatisfaction (ibid., 2023). Creating win-win situations for the different stakeholders involved in the measures, especially employers and the vulnerable students themselves, is also a highly important factor of feasibility and effectiveness of the VET measures, and is especially oriented to work-based learning (WBL) and employment (ibid., 2023).

The research literature also indicates the special role of apprenticeships and WBL measures in the empowerment of vulnerable learners. Work-based learning at authentic workplaces creates the preconditions for vocational integration and the socialization of vulnerable learners, including people with disabilities (Cavanagh et al., 2019; Ceelen et al., 2023). Short-term apprenticeship and WBL measures can be highly effective in empowering and integrating some vulnerable groups of learners, for example, refugees (Aerne and Bonoli, 2023). Here, flexibility during the implementation of the VET measures, as well as freedom of engagement and the participation of stakeholders are also important factors in effectiveness (, 2023). The application of apprenticeship and WBL related pedagogical practices when empowering vulnerable youth, significantly depend on the position and ethical decision making of the enterprises (Wilson, 2021).

With strong focus on different institutional factors of VET empowerment measures, the existing research literature lacks insights and knowledge of the relationship between these institutional factors and the applied VET pedagogy practices. There is a lack of knowledge and holistic understanding of the relationships between the pedagogical practices of empowerment of vulnerable VET students applied in the education and training institutions and the institutional factors of the VET provision on the national and international level (VET policy, legal regulation, social dialogue). This article seeks to fill this gap by exploring the educational practices of VET providers as a means of addressing the needs of vulnerable VET students, by investigating the relationship between the institutional and pedagogical factors of these practices.

The present research was carried out within the framework of the Baltic Research Programme Project "Vocational education and workplace training enhancing social inclusion of at-risk young people" (EmpowerVET project) which explores how VET can enhance social inclusion of young at-risk people, both in terms of combating student dropout and promoting transitions between various (social) learning contexts, such as a school-work transition. The research focuses on the following issues of specific educational practices related to the empowerment of vulnerable VET students:

- 1) What are the institutional factors within the provision of VET in Lithuania and Latvia, that support the empowerment of vulnerable VET students?
- 2) What pedagogical factors of applied pedagogical practices (related to curriculum design, organization of the training provided, assessment of learning, etc.), support the empowerment of vulnerable VET students in these two countries?
- 3) How do the defined institutional and pedagogical factors of empowering pedagogical practices interrelate with respect to enhancing or impeding the empowerment of vulnerable learners?

The article starts with an overview of research literature on VET empowerment practices and an outline of institutional and educational factors of these practices. This part is followed by the presentation of research methodology, introduction of the socio-economic and institutional context of VET empowerment practices in the two Baltic countries, and the presentation of the selected practices for analysis. Subsequently, the findings of the research on identified measures are provided and the relationships between the institutional and pedagogical factors of these measures are discussed.

2. Theoretical Framework for the Research of Empowering Practices of VET Provision

An empowering practice of VET provision can be defined as a concrete intervention of a VET provider targeted at enabling the autonomy and enhancing the capabilities of vulnerable students in the matters concerning their learning, employment, and social participation. Looking from this perspective, the empowering VET practice balances between the learner capacity building and tackling different subjective and objective obstacles faced by the vulnerable learner in the VET schools, workplaces, and other related environments. The capacity building element highly depends on the pedagogical factors of empowerment practice, while tackling of subjective and objective obstacles faced by learners highly depends on the institutional factors of VET practice.

Empowering VET provider practices are also largely shaped by the policy context. The mission of vocational education and training is traditionally regarded by the policy makers through the duality of goals. The developmental and empowering mission of VET has been promoted and stressed by the EU policies alongside the economic mission of providing skills in line with the human capital approach (López-Fogués, 2012). EU policies prioritize enhancement and development of the individual agency of VET learners, including their moral

humanistic education, in seeking to make VET as one of the pathways of implementing social justice as a framework (ibid., 2012).

The idea that vocational education and training should help the integration of vulnerable and “excluded” young people and lift them from poverty and exclusion has been shared in Europe by different interest groups since the mid-19th century, starting from the Church and religious charity organizations (Giovanni Bosco and other saints engaged in social activity in Italy, Kolping in Germany), social thinkers and intellectuals (Durkheim), and reformers and ideologists of the national education systems (Kirchensteiner). One of the background principles of this idea is that vocational training should be based on the publicly provided solid general education, including ethical and moral education as a background for shaping resilience, personal, civic and professional attitude/identity of a young person. It has been supported by the institutional formalization of provision of vocational training, when the apprenticeship-based training was replaced with public school-based vocational education (Gonon and Deissinger, 2021). In this context the social integration and socialization of vulnerable, at-risk young people become an integral part of the mission of the public education systems of the newly emerged nation states, impacted by the social uprisings and revolutions of the mid-19th century (Clark, 2023), establishment of the national states in the 2nd half of the 19th century and the development of the modern welfare state models in the 20th century.

Following Kitcher (2022), empowering educational/pedagogical capacities of the VET can be enhanced by liberating vocational education from the domination of the Smith’s Principle (education narrowly targeted to skill formation for labour market) and directing it to preparing the youth for fulfilling lives and work. Vocational education and training should not only help learners accessing to and engaging in the occupations, but also facilitate their fulfilment through them. In relation to this, VET can significantly contribute to the development of responsibility and citizenship competence of vulnerable students by engaging them in different planning activities, listening to their voices, and facilitating student cooperation in finding solutions to different problems. Exercises in joint planning and cooperative decision making can be applied, pursued in fostering capacities of empathy and good citizenship (ibid., 2022).

Referring to VET curriculum design as a factor of empowerment of vulnerable students, there can be distinguished different aspects, starting from the scope and breadth of the VET curriculum oriented to empowerment and ending with the accessibility of the content of VET curricula to low achievers in learning and vulnerable youth. For example, VET curricula adjusted to the capacities of low achievers, but not challenging nor significantly improving the state of their competencies lead to low-skilled and low paid employment and present no sustainable solution for such learners under the conditions of high skills economy (Polesel and Clarke 2011; Young, 2008). Balance of consideration of students learning needs and their empowerment in providing solid powerful general and vocational knowledge through comprehensive and undifferentiated curriculum could be more suitable for such learners (Young, 2008; Wheelahan, 2017). Tensions between the aims to achieve educational equality and equal access to education through the standardization of VET curricula from the one side and satisfaction of skills needs in the labour market which require more differentiated approach to VET curriculum design are typical for the VET reforms in different countries (Hiim, 2020).

Empowering pedagogy is always open to the perspective of employment, work and civil participation. Empowering pedagogical approaches, like the ones developed by Giovanni Bosco, Paolo Freire and Lorenzo Milani, always foster disadvantaged learners to analyze and to discuss different moral dilemmas and aspects of justice in the situations of work and social life, including the moral and justice aspects of employment and industrial relations (Cesari, 2023; Tacconi, 2017). Introduction of the learners to the understanding and analysis of the literary-historical-geographical-anthropological perspective of work supplemented with main concepts in economics, sociology, political science and psychology can have very important orientation and educative effect (Kitcher, 2022). Industrial relations and collective defence of labour interests could also be an important object of such study and learning (Cesari, 2023).

Another important element of empowering VET pedagogy is raising interest and motivation of disadvantaged learners in acquiring and nurturing powerful science-based knowledge by combining the presentation of this knowledge with practical problems in the work process and everyday life (Young, 2008; Tacconi and Mejia Gomez, 2013). Nurturing and fostering of the esthetical interests of vulnerable students is also highly important, including education of the aesthetics related to work processes combining it with the education of creativity (Kitcher, 2022). The humanistic and justice-oriented direction of vocational education for empowerment of vulnerable young people is characterised by openness to the needs and problems of the student from the one side, and to the empowering factor of community acting from the other. For example, the pedagogical approaches of the Salesian VET centres in Italy and other countries for the empowerment of learners are based on the fostering of educative learning environment in the VET centres through friendly and supportive relationships between teachers and students enhanced by the community and family spirit, promotion of the tacit learning, applying personalized approaches to the vocational didactics, and enabling the maturation of personality and internalization of moral and ethical values in the contexts of work (humanistic growth) (Tacconi, 2011; Tacconi and Mejia Gomez 2013). This is achieved through strong focus on learning in the real work contexts, attention to the development of

methodical competencies, including learning to learn skills, development of the “eudaimonic” attitude to work by feeling the taste of “well done work” and nurturing responsible attitude to work, as well as applying didactic strategies based on learning by doing, enabling and encouraging learners to accomplish their masterpieces by allocating authentic tasks of practical training, facilitating transformation of the scholar failures (e.g. dropping out of general education) into the learning success by treating mistakes as source of learning in the context of work, strong orientation of the students to the autonomous execution of future work and learning activities, and using humanizing power of religious education well integrated with vocational education (Tacconi and Mejia Gomez 2013). Treating disadvantaged young people with respect, caring for them, and working in the small groups and with teachers who enjoy working with youth are very important empowering factors of VET (Polesel, 2010; Tacconi 2011).

Similarly, the capability approach in the design of the VET practices promotes the orientation of VET towards enabling human freedoms and flourishing of disadvantaged learners, by placing the needs and aspirations of these students at the centre of attention (McGrath et al., 2022). It focuses the attention to such elements, as experiencing of multidimensional poverty by the VET learners, gendered perspective, interaction with the political economy of skills account, a broad conceptualization of work, a focus on flourishing, the centrality of aspirations, a multiplicity of decision points in vocational learning pathways and an evaluative dimension. Therefore, the interventions in supporting vulnerable learners involve solving the challenges of funding to sustain during the period of studies, supporting vulnerable students in making decisions about continuation and proceeding with their studies, dealing with the problem of employment in the low skilled or unskilled jobs during the studies (ibid., 2022).

Referring to the institutional aspects of implementation of empowering VET practices, one of the key challenges of the VET in empowering vulnerable learners is related to provision of high quality specific vocational competencies and skills for changing work processes, which requires focusing on the provision of hard to access high quality work-based learning in the real workplace settings, implying stronger selectivity of learners (Polesel, 2010). This challenge exemplifies a tension between the “social” orientation of the VET provision and application of the market-based quality concept of vocational training with an important role of input parameters tending to limit the access to high-quality VET, such as increasing selectivity in enrolment or involved additional costs for learners. Such tension can be observed in the dual vocational education and training typical for collective skill formation systems. The dual pathway of VET provision has already proved its effectiveness both in terms of quality, accessibility and inclusiveness of VET provision in the context of fast industrial development and increasing demand of vocational skills in the labour market (Schmidt, 2010; Spöttl, 2016). The increasing attractiveness of VET for highly skilled youth in Germany facilitates the quality of the VET provision but at the same time makes high quality VET too competitive to access for low achievers, including school dropouts (Haasler, 2020). There is a transition system in place to help low achievers entering the dual apprenticeship, but a rather significant part of these learners are not able to complete it. Provision of less qualifying dual training programmes for youth with learning difficulties and early school leavers indicates efforts of making dual training more accessible for vulnerable students. However, the accessibility of real workplaces for such training highly depends on the economic situation (Schmidt, 2010).

The collective skill formation systems are also driven by the interests of productivity and quality of skilled workforce, which often causes the resistance of employers to the attempts to activate the social integration mission in this institutional form of VET provision (Aerne and Bonoli, 2021). One of the key shortages of the application of work-based learning and apprenticeship for the integration and empowering of vulnerable youth is the narrow focus of such interventions and programmes on employment and preparation for the first job (Markowitsch and Wittig, 2022). Giesinger (2017) suggests bringing more equity in the dual VET by abolishing the early selection and tracking of students into workplace-based vocational and academic tracks, what should not endanger the quality of dual VET provision and would combine the benefits of a strong vocational system and high-quality academic education and would foster the permeability between the VET and higher education studies. Therefore, educational interventions oriented to social integration in the countries with collective skill formation systems are often implemented without direct reference to these systems. Strengthening and extension of school-based VET provision in the economically challenging time periods with a strong component of general education are considered as potentially effective alternatives to dual VET for the disadvantaged learners.

Making VET more accessible and flexible through implementation of modular VET curricula is also considered as an option. The absence of the solid VET qualification based on the important share of WBL in the enterprises presents important obstacles and risks here in seeking employment for the vulnerable or at-risk students completing different alternative or propaedeutic VET courses offered by the VET schools (Schmidt, 2010). This shows the importance of the variety of vocational and tertiary education opportunities for balancing the flows of learners and widening access to apprenticeship for different learners, including vulnerable ones. The provision of vocational education integrated with general secondary education is the dominant trend in the school-based VET systems. This model of VET provision can have different implications for vulnerable youth: through higher selectivity it can reduce accessibility of such VET for disadvantaged youth, yet when such education is accessible it contributes significantly to social mobility of young people with poorer backgrounds (Polesel and Clarke, 2011).

The Nordic countries seek to increase the integration and empowerment potential of VET by strengthening the provision of general education and WBL, and practical training (Nylund and Rosvall, 2019). Increasing the eligibility of vulnerable VET students for higher education and implementation of apprenticeship schemes for the potential dropouts are applied as instruments. Implementation of apprenticeships for vulnerable youth also entails a risk of blocking them in poorly valued routes of employment and participation in civil society. Understanding of variety of institutional and pedagogical factors of empowering VET practices is helpful in the processes of their design, implementation, revision and adjustment. With reference to the analysis above, the following subjects of research of these factors can be suggested (Table 2):

Table 2 *Institutional and pedagogical factors of empowering VET practices*

| Institutional factors of empowering VET practices | Pedagogical factors of empowering VET practices |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional accessibility (access regime) of VET practice. • Relationship of practice, the VET policies and reforms. • Reliance on and support of existing public institutional settings and legal framework for VET provision. • Stakeholder involvement in the design and implementation of the measures. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pedagogical goals of education and training practices and their orientation to empowerment. • Priorities and targets of curriculum design related to empowering VET practice. • Meeting the learning and development needs of vulnerable students with the support of the school/training centre community. • Availability of pedagogical support in the school-based and work-based learning environments. |

These subjects of research are examined in the exploration of empowering VET practices in Lithuania and Latvia described in the next sections.

3. Research Methodology

The research considers established school-based practices for the empowerment of vulnerable VET students in the two Baltic countries. These practices have been selected by applying the following criteria:

- i) The aim of the practice: to enhance and support the social inclusion of the at-risk youth through VET by preventing exclusion (including dropout), from learning processes, fostering employment and civil engagement.
- ii) The types of practice: targeted interventions/measures aiming to support vulnerable youth in the vocational education and employment processes.
- iii) The scope of the practice: practices initiated, implemented and applied by the VET schools/providers (i.e., the level of VET providers).

Selected practices were identified by applying desk research on secondary information, VET policy documents and publications on the VET provision. Qualitative research has been applied using the focus group method. The research sample consisted of VET teachers, social pedagogues, psychologists and managers of the VET establishments (Table 3). The main criteria for selecting the research sample were direct participation of persons in the design, implementation and application of empowering VET practices in the school, as well as professional experience in these areas (at least 2 years of experience in working with the empowering measures). Convenience sampling was applied. Focus groups were convened between September 2021 and April of 2022.

Table 3 *Composition of the focus groups*

| | VET teachers | Practical trainers | Support teaching staff (social pedagogues, psychologists) | Managers of VET schools |
|-----------|---------------------|---------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Lithuania | 4 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| Latvia | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |

Focus group discussions were conducted by using the following questionnaire consisting of three parts (Table 4):

Table 4 Research questionnaire for focus groups

| Research topic | Background /Justification | Questions for discussion |
|---|--|--|
| Context and preconditions of empowerment practices applied in the school | Holistic and contextualised understanding of the local social, economic, cultural, legal and other conditions for vulnerability of learners. | How many socially vulnerable (at-risk) students do you have? How does this volume/share change with the time? What are the main groups/categories of vulnerable students? Tell us what do you know about the living and learning environment of socially vulnerable students in your school (family situation, parent employment, living conditions, health condition, etc.). |
| Targets and scope of the empowering practices | Disclosing the reasons of social risk situation, key features of the target group of empowerment measures. Understanding of the goal and objectives of the measure. | What are the main reasons for the risk of social exclusion/vulnerability of your students? To what extent and how can the VET school and teachers deal with these reasons? How did you choose and develop the analysed empowering measure? What is the main goal of this measure? What are the objectives/tasks? |
| Institutional and pedagogical factors defining success or failure of the applied empowering practices | Disclosing the main pedagogical approaches, methods and instruments applied in the empowerment measure. Disclosing the implications of the institutional factors of VET provision (governance of VET provision, autonomy and capacities of the VET schools, organization of curriculum design, training provision, assessment etc.) for the implementation of the empowerment measure. | What VET curriculum design approaches are used (if any)? What pedagogical approaches, principles and methods are used in designing and implementing your chosen measure? How and to what extent were the vulnerable VET students involved in the development and implementation of the measure? How and to what extent were the existing occupational standards and modular VET curricula helpful in implementing the measure? How and to what extent were the existing arrangements of organization of theoretical and practical training (including apprenticeship) helpful in implementing the measure? How and to what extent was the engagement of local and national stakeholders and social partners helpful in implementing the measure? |

The transcriptions of focus group discussions were analysed by applying the narrative analysis method.

3. The Context and Specific Characteristics of Selected Empowerment Practices

VET practices for the empowerment of vulnerable students are designed, implemented and developed in the local and national socioeconomic and institutional context of skill formation and VET provision. These institutional settings for skill formation systems and VET provision can support or hinder the introduction and implementation of VET empowerment practices. Political and institutional attitudes and approaches when dealing with at-risk and disadvantaged youth in VET also play important role. In this regard there are no significant differences between Latvia and Lithuania. The empowerment and social integration of at-risk youth in the VET systems of these Baltic countries are strongly influenced by a combination of the market orientation and the priority to foster employability, provision of equal access to the school-based public VET system, and efforts to provide systemic support to socially disadvantaged or at-risk young people by referring to the EU strategies of skill formation and employment (Tütlys et al., 2022). In such conditions, the institutional accessibility of training and support for employment at the national level is often not accompanied by sufficient social, pedagogical, and psychological support because of a shortage of teaching auxiliary staff (Tütlys et al., 2022). Very often it leads to the stronger reliance of at-risk students on themselves (assuming higher personal responsibility for creating their future life), and on support from their families, kinship, relatives and friends in the learning and employment context. Lack of social support pushes VET students to find employment in unskilled or low-skilled jobs, thereby compromising the quality of studies and chances of graduation. This risk is hardly counteracted by the still quite fragmented work-based learning opportunities provided by the market-oriented, but school-based VET systems of Lithuania and Latvia (Table 5).

Table 5 *The institutional and political context of empowerment of vulnerable students in the VET systems of Lithuania and Latvia*

| Context of VET provision | Institutional model of VET provision and key trends of its governance | Key VET policies and reforms targeting vulnerable learners |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| Lithuania | <p>Mainly a school-based VET system.</p> <p>Decentralization of the state-led network of VET schools by enhancing engagement of stakeholders in the management of VET providers in 2013–2018: optimization of the network of VET centres, changing the legal status of public VET providers into public entities in seeking to engage social partners in decision making, and implementation of the sectoral practical training centres to widen access to work-based learning.</p> <p>Provision of support to vulnerable students in the decentralised way by school-based VET.</p> | <p>Employability oriented reforms focused on the implementation of flexible competence-based VET curricula in 2013–2018 (modularization by introducing national modular VET curricula aligned with sectoral qualification standards) and slow introduction of work-based learning components (apprenticeship as an alternative learning pathway to school-based VET).</p> <p>Scant policy attention to the pedagogical and psychological aspects of empowerment of vulnerable youth in VET (underinvestment in training teaching and support staff) and high dependency of the empowering policy actions on the EU policy agenda and funding (Youth Guarantees, etc.).</p> |
| Latvia | <p>Mainly a school-based VET system.</p> <p>Optimization of the network of the public VET providers in seeking to improve the quality and public image of VET, creation of VET competence centres with investments in the infrastructure and teacher training.</p> | <p>Reforms balancing between market-oriented and social-policy oriented VET provision goals with the help of EU policy guidelines and support. Strongly prioritised economic and market orientation in implementing competence-based qualifications, VET curricula, and apprenticeships.</p> <p>Attention to the capacity building of VET teaching staff in the field of pedagogical and psychosocial support to students, especially vulnerable ones (ESF funded “Support for the Reduction of Early Leaving” (PUMPURS) project in strengthening the capacities of teaching staff).</p> |

The VET practice selected in *Lithuania* deals with empowerment of vulnerable students through intermediation in practical training and employment in the labour market of scarce opportunities in rural areas. The analyzed practice of VET school mediation in apprenticeship and employment of vulnerable students is implemented by a small VET school located in the rural region of Lithuania. This public VET centre provides initial and continuing VET, as well as general and special education. In 2021–2022, 150 students enrolled in the initial VET and 111 students enrolled in the CVET programmes at the school. The school employed 23 VET teachers and 21 teachers of general education. In the department of general education of the school, students who obtain basic education study according to the secondary education programme alongside the vocational training programme. Those who successfully complete the first and second year of the training programme are issued a certificate of secondary education (Matura Certificate) or a certificate of educational achievements. In the vocational training department of the school, students study according to the initial and continuing vocational training programmes of different qualification levels. The school provides vocational training in nine vocational training areas – manufacturing and processing, metalworking and engineering professions, services to individuals, social welfare, health care, transport services, business and administration, arts, and agriculture. Initial and continuing vocational education programmes offer 41 qualifications corresponding to levels 2, 3 and 4 of the European and Lithuanian Qualifications Framework. When implementing vocational training programmes, practical training makes up 70% of the scope of the programmes. Part of the practical training is carried out in school classrooms, laboratories,

simulated kitchens for training, cafeteria, and at workshops. To get acquainted with modern technologies, practical training is organized for students at sectoral vocational training centres, companies/institutions, in the form of internships within the mobility projects of the Erasmus+ programme.

One of the key features of the socio-economic context of this school is highly limited possibilities of decent employment for graduates especially for those in social risk groups, because of the scarcity of well-paid jobs in the local labour market. The vocational school community is aware of this circumstance and takes initiative to help students find a job even during the initial stage of youth adaptation in the labour market. Teaching staff of the VET school is actively engaged in enrolling vulnerable adolescents in the VET school by promoting the VET pathway to young people and their families. Once enrolled, vulnerable students are often offered the apprenticeship pathway of learning at the local enterprises. The school has developed a cooperation network with local companies, which serves this purpose. A significant portion of the VET teachers also works as part time employees at these enterprises because of the precarity of their teaching jobs. This also contributes to adjusting training provision to the skills needs of the enterprises, as well as to the mediation between the vulnerable students and companies in the WBL process. By applying apprenticeship, both VET school teaching staff and trainers who work for local companies coordinate the acceptance of students for apprenticeships and their employment in the companies according to the local skills needs. The VET school also assumes responsibility for the quality of vocational training, by adjusting the training curricula to the specific requirements of employers in the region. In this way the school becomes one of the most important sources of qualified labour for local employers increasingly struggling to find and attract such workforce.

At the same time, the VET school remains the most important centre for education and culture in the region and supports the vitality of the economic life of the region. The organization of the work-based learning of vulnerable students in the enterprises is carried out with strong involvement and support of the VET school. For example, the VET school selects and trains trainers for the enterprises providing them with the pedagogical competencies needed to work with vulnerable students, as well as planning the WBL content. Provision of work-based learning for vulnerable students is supplemented with different educational projects in the VET school targeted at the provision of transversal skills and competencies and personal development of students. One of the most important motives of the school's mediation activities is to direct the youth living in the region to the vocational training programmes implemented by the vocational school. The number of students studying at the school determines the amount of funding allocated by the state, and at the same time the jobs for teaching staff. The empowerment practice selected in *Latvia* deals with the efforts of schools to identify the risks of exclusion and vulnerability of learners and to coordinate the systemic support of VET schools. This practice entails the implementation of a system for identifying the needs of the students at risk at their school and communicating these needs to all relevant colleagues or services at their school in order to take further actions. The school has appointed nine group mentors for the work with vulnerable students. These class mentors are free from any teaching; they work full-time for the needs of students at risk. The work of the group mentors is in turn organized and supervised by the institution level coordinator.

The prime task of the group mentor is to be available to the student at risk at any time, to listen to what the student wants or needs to discuss. Depending on the type of issue or the problem the student speaks about, the group mentor either renders immediate support or notes it and organizes further necessary activities. For example, if the problem is related to academic issues, the group mentor may discuss it with the teacher of a specific course. If it is a psychological or emotional problem, the mentor may contact the school psychologist; in case of a social problem, the social worker will address it. In this way there is a clear procedure put in place 1) for students to know whom they should talk to about their problems (the first contact is the class mentor); 2) for the administration, teachers and other staff of the school to know how the obtained or incoming information on the students at risk is being circulated internally – so that it is placed correctly and immediate or timely solutions are sought. This approach, among other issues, also helps to solve the contradiction between teaching and upbringing, addressed by pedagogical theories (Gudjons, p. 281). The VET institution has developed a specific form that allows to identify risks for early leaving. The staff member in charge (group mentor) can identify these risks by evaluating the student's learning activity, behaviour, family situation, communication and collaboration with classmates and teachers. After the risk assessment, individual support measures can be developed for the student and the necessary preventive/support/intervention measures applied according to the identified situation. These may include: 1) consultations (with course teachers, psychologists, social pedagogues, or other specialists) or 2) material support or compensations, for example for public transport tickets, accommodation, meals or individual training resources, based on the individual situation.

The analysis of the institutional and pedagogical factors of empowerment typical for the above-described VET practices is provided in subsequent sections of the article.

3. Findings of Research

3.1 Socio-economic and Institutional Factors of the Identified Empowering VET Practices

Although, in general, the empowerment of vulnerable young people to learn and be employed is (to a different degree) present as an object of VET policies and strategies in the two Baltic countries, the level of priority of this issue slightly differs. VET policies of these countries share the priority of making VET provision to better respond to changing skills needs in the labour market, which overall enhances the improvement of the quality and accessibility of VET provision. Since VET policies of the Baltic countries stronger follow the neoliberal pathway of reforming VET and skill formation, this makes empowering of vulnerable students one of the objects of employment-oriented policies and practices in VET. As a result, governments, using the financial support from the EU, invest in the infrastructure of the VET provision, and implement competence-based VET reforms and WBL approaches. One of the key problems with this approach is a lack of attention to the systemic pedagogical-psychological and social aspects of empowerment of vulnerable VET students, such as capacity building of teaching staff in this field, or insufficiency of available socio-economic support to learner and their families. Shortage of pedagogical and psychological support specialists also remains a serious problem in the VET schools. These problems are partially tackled by the EU supported programmes and measures, like Youth Guarantees programmes for supporting labour market integration of unemployed youth. Such institutional context significantly narrows the possibilities for the VET schools' practices and actions directed at empowerment of vulnerable students to rely on systemic support of state by relying more on the local capacities and (often rather fragmented) local networks of social partners.

With reference to the analyzed practice of guidance and intermediation for vulnerable VET students in work-based learning and the labour market in the rural region of Lithuania, several key socioeconomic and institutional factors shape the choice and possibilities of training and employment pathways of vulnerable students: poverty of students and their families, forced choice of temporary low-skilled jobs during studies, as well as shortages and deficiencies of VET policies and limitations of VET school capacities .

Poverty of VET students and their families in the rural area significantly limits and impairs the agency of at-risk students in vocational learning. Because of the lack of resources, they are pushed to unskilled/low skilled jobs and experience social and cultural capital deficit.

"The biggest problem is poverty. Not only material, but also in terms of family relations, lack of support, poverty of the worldview and mentality. All this creates a vicious circle. Children come from different families and bring the poverty related 'background', such as different fears, lack of abilities and capacities to live a valuable life, starting from the elementary personal hygiene skills to the management of own finances, time or communication. We even have the term "an impoverished kid" (užskurdintas vaikas). It has different reasons, starting from the parents, physical and mental development before the school. ... I can notice a wide gap in the welfare of students: some of them face no shortages, others are deprived of everything. I would say that such [deprived] students make from 10% to 20%" (focus group from Lithuania).

Poverty and deprivation enhance egocentrism of at-risk students and their dependency attitude (as a legacy of their life experience) creating specific challenges for their socialization in the VET schools, making them overly dependent on external support and passive towards their future plans.

"I notice the rather strong egocentrism of such students. They see it as though teachers and all school community should serve only them and their welfare. If something goes wrong with their studies or life, they blame others. You must work with such students a lot to show the advantages of community life and voluntary activities. With the help of such efforts it is possible to change their attitude to some extent, but not completely...

I would call it learning to make mistakes, to get into trouble. For example: if I lack anything, others (society) provide it to me. Then, why I should make efforts and work? They lose the understanding of the value of work and of common work for their lives and the lives of other people."(focus group from Lithuania).

These circumstances make VET teachers and social pedagogues seek for educational measures and activities aimed at socialisation through work activities, including paid work, and especially WBL. At the same time, easy access to low-skilled precarious jobs tends to reduce the attractiveness of acquisition of vocational qualification/diploma for vulnerable students, i.e. it works as a kind of sufficiently powerful nudge to drop out of the VET school by choosing any employment today rather than higher quality employment and life in the future:

'Looking at the longer-term trends: if some 10 or more years ago the completion of a training programme and acquisition of a qualification was a matter of principle and prestige for students, today students from low-income families prioritize the fastest possible ways to earn money, while acquisition of educational credentials or qualification become rather a secondary target. (...) If they can see the possibility to get employed even in the unskilled jobs and get wage as fast as possible, they go for it without any concerns about the future.'(focus group from Lithuania).

Teachers also notice that orientation of the current VET curriculum to narrowly define competence-based modules does not match the skills needs in the rural regions where SMEs and individual enterprises dominate the labour market:

'Nobody (at the policy level) cares about educating personalities in the context of VET, who could grow and develop. VET curricula are not just reduced but also split into very narrow specializations. In our region we need broader VET qualifications and curricula, e.g. a waiter-bartender, who could work at a local cafeteria both as a waiter and a bartender. Large employers from big cities (who play the key roles and have too much influence in the design of qualifications and VET curricula) require narrower specializations and a fast "delivery" of specialists, like, to train the waiter in 30 hours or the bartender in 40 hours' (focus group from Lithuania).

The narrow orientation of VET curricula to work functions and vocational competencies contributes to the lack of attractiveness of vocational training and dropping out of VET:

'The approach to VET curriculum design should be more holistic in seeking to enable development of both professional skills, key, personal competencies and values. The competences aimed in the curriculum design should be a bit higher, not limited just to execution of functions, like hammering, because such curriculum is highly tiresome and not attractive to young people. Consequently, young people will quit VET schools' (focus group from Lithuania).

The existing institutional apprenticeship pathway in VET lacks capacities to involve and empower vulnerable students because of the absence of a real social dialogue in this field, passive and formal engagement of employers and formal implementation of the apprenticeship pathway, when the main responsibility for it is delegated to VET providers:

'(Apprenticeship) works only in theory, but not in practice. Employers' Confederation is delegated to run this process and has great power (...) but their understanding of educational problems and environment is very limited, and when they start to shape the policy agenda Employers do not accept the responsibility for the training of apprentices. As a result, we have a parody of apprenticeship, when employers still wait for oven-ready young employees while the schools are deprived of the possibilities to train such employees. (...) OK, we take an apprentice, and we find a company for training. How to deal with formal legal contractual requirements? (...) We (schools) must attain the prescribed quotas for apprenticeship training, call employers and persuade them to conclude apprenticeship contracts' (focus group from Lithuania).

Generally, teachers support the idea, that apprenticeships and other WBL forms can be regarded as suitable means to deal with the empowerment obstacles of vulnerable students in the rural areas, despite existing limitations posed by the legal and institutional framework.

'Apprenticeships can really help, especially, when theoretical knowledge is acquired at school, while practical skills – at real workplaces in enterprises. The main obstacle is that most students in 11th–12th grades are not yet in the age of majority. This becomes a serious problem for employers in many occupational areas wishing to take such apprentices' (focus group from Lithuania).

The main socio-psychological and educational support to vulnerable students is provided by the VET teachers and trainers due to the lack of specialized staff:

'The number of at-risk students is growing in the group, but everything still relies on the individual approach of a teacher, there are no systemic, institutional, or methodical measures and solutions on how to support such students in their learning. We do not have a special pedagogy, or a teacher assistant to help these students to learn, or expert teachers who could support our teachers in concrete pedagogical situations, like preparation and adjustment of the learning tasks.' (focus group from Lithuania).

All the socio-economic and institutional obstacles and limitations for empowerment of vulnerable students indicated above make the VET schools and teachers rely on the measures directed to personalized and individualized support to vulnerable students by applying available networks and close relations with local stakeholders and social partners. Vocational teachers contact families of at-risk students even before their enrolment in the school. As a result, mutually beneficial relationships based on empathy, openness, trust, and compassion are established. In this way, schools perform the functions of vocational guidance and counselling, thereby forming sufficient flows of students to vocational training programmes that are relevant for the labour market and are implemented at the school.

Sometimes in such situations disadvantages can be turned into opportunities. For example, due to modest salaries many vocational teachers work at schools only part time and are at the same time employed by the regional companies. This provides additional opportunities for intermediation between the vulnerable students and enterprises, as well as allows to obtain information about job vacancies on the market and the specifics of the required job.

'Many of our VET teachers also work for the local companies so we have direct access to the skills needs by these companies and opportunities for work-based learning and employment' (focus group from Lithuania).

The school has also developed a database of potential local companies whose requirements for skilled workforce correspond to the content of vocational training programmes. They contact these companies to organize various forms of practical training and to apply the apprenticeship training model. The school also takes

responsibility for the future career of students by providing letters of reference (feedback) to students, and taking care of its own reputation in training teenagers for the job market. In *Latvia*, targeted national measures are implemented to promote the creation of a sustainable collaboration system between the municipality, educational institutions, teachers, support staff and parents or student representatives. A unified database has been created, which ensures regular exchange of information at the level of the state, municipality and educational institution about students who are identified as being at risk of dropping out of school, the preventive measures taken and their results. It provides full statistics and ensures long-term evaluation of the effectiveness of the measures. The measures are aimed at early diagnosis of problems and solutions.

Individual support is provided to learners who might stop studying due to the lack of financial resources through local governments, for example, by compensating expenses for transport, meals, accommodation, etc.

'There is an important economic aspect – catering payments from the local government (e.g. Barkava) provided for socially vulnerable students in some places.' *'Such young people need financial support to be able to act independently in their training pathways.'* *'Learners with disabilities (Vidzeme - Alsviki) have food refunds from the State'* (focus group from Latvia).

However, the focus is not the provision of temporary financial assistance, but the creation of a sustainable comprehensive mechanism that creates a supportive and inclusive environment for every learner. In seeking to develop targeted methodologies and training courses for general education and VET schools, teaching and administrative staff working with vulnerable students have implemented the ESF funded PUMPURS project. In the framework of this project, specially designed professional competence development programmes for teaching and administrative staff were developed. These programmes target the understanding of the unity of the education (training) and learning process, improvement of skills in individual and group counselling, and abilities to recognize problem situations (including cases of peer violence) and seek appropriate solutions, as well as offer support material for educators/teachers. In addition to the available targeted training courses for working with youth at risk, teachers are supported (provided) with supervisory/ consultancy support which helps educators and support staff to cope with the challenges in their professional activity. The purpose of the supervisions is threefold: 1) to improve the professional competence of educators and support staff in identifying the risks of early school leaving, 2) to increase self-efficacy in working with students exposed to the risks of early school leaving, as well as 3) to promote mindfulness of one's own capabilities in order to reduce the risks of burnout syndrome.

Teachers in the focus group emphasised that *"...individual support to students at risk takes a lot of time, but it is necessary and useful to students, as students often do not have any reasonable support and advice from their families and relatives". Students are waiting for those consultations and use this opportunity to get individual advice"; "...regular training courses on working with students at risk are very valuable to gain additional competence in this field"; "...renovation and modernization of vocational school buildings and providing with modern equipment motivate students and staff for better work"* (focus group from Latvia).

The focus groups involving teachers have confirmed that teachers are interested in their work with students at risk and they recognize and value the possibility for working with these students individually, and also the possibility for additional training on how to work with this target group. Nevertheless, the teachers were also quite negative about frequently encountered situations when students are not willing to learn, and there are indications that education is not valued in the families they come from. The cases where learners have health disorders that cause learning difficulties are also relatively frequent. Continuous support is required in these cases, but is not always available. In the teachers' opinion such young people need financial support to be able to act independently. There are cases where specific groups of disabled students are formed, and students get food expenses refunded by the state, and support from psychologist, medical staff, and social educator. According to teachers, *'95% of these students still acquire a profession'* (focus group from Latvia). Concerning the state policy and legislative developments, the teachers were positive about the recent changes in the VET law proposing the solution of micro-credentials and the possibility for learners who are unable to complete a full qualification programme.

"A micro-qualification" is a very good solution for vulnerable learners." (focus group from Latvia).

Some teachers were pointing out the sociopolitical context as a cause for early school leaving. For example, the existing employment policy may *'encourage not to complete education and training, since youngsters can get employed and start making money without a completed education or acquired qualification'* (focus group from Latvia).

According to teachers, it would be a socially responsible act if the company encouraged the learners performing practical training to complete their chosen training programme while the company would *'commit itself to waiting for the young person's return after the young person finishes the studies.'* (focus group from Latvia). *'The person in charge of practical training at the company should also be responsible for encouraging these learners to complete their education and wait for them to return to the company where the learners did their practice.'* (focus group from Latvia). However, *'so far, employers have been those who do not encourage at-risk young people to learn the profession'* (focus group from Latvia).

It was also pointed out that the role and potential of the career counsellor is not yet fully understood and recognised. More appropriate education programmes should be considered in this regard. Another problem is huge workload of teachers, which creates barriers to attracting new teachers. Most of the teachers are older, and this has its advantages and disadvantages. Besides, *'students tend to prefer young teachers (not so numerous), also technological capabilities of teachers matter to young people'* (focus group from Latvia). Finally, the increased workload of teachers working with vulnerable VET students increases the demand for VET teaching staff but the perspectives of satisfying this demand are very unclear because of the shortage of new teachers and low esteem of the teaching profession in the country.

3.2. Pedagogical Factors of Empowering VET Practices

Pedagogical factors of empowerment practices of the VET establishments are defined by the educational orientation of the public VET provision (balancing of orientation to the vocational and general education pathways), attention to empowerment in the VET policies and reforms in the field of curriculum design and organisation of the vocational learning and training pathways, as well as resourcefulness of the VET providers and stakeholders in terms of human, organizational and other resources, necessary for empowerment practices. In this respect, important similarities and specificities of the analyzed countries can be outlined

First, the VET provision in both analyzed countries integrates provision of school-based vocational training and general education. This creates favourable preconditions for educational empowerment of vulnerable young people by fostering accessibility to the further learning pathways after graduation from the VET school. Some important nuances should also be considered here. VET policies and reforms in the analysed Baltic countries foster liberalization and flexibility of choice of educational pathways in VET. This often makes vulnerable young people (especially those facing economic deprivations and difficulties) choose easier accessible and shorter educational pathways, leading to quicker acquisition of vocational qualification without general secondary education. The efforts of implementation of apprenticeships in the VET system, due to their marginal spread and coverage, so far have not resulted in significant outcomes of empowerment in terms of graduate employment and career. Pedagogical empowerment potential in the analysed Baltic countries is also weakened by the systemic shortages of the pedagogical staff, especially support staff for vulnerable students in VET establishments, remaining one of the key gaps of resources after the significant upgrading of the training infrastructure of the VET schools with the help of EU structural fund projects.

The practice of the VET school in Lithuania in providing guidance and intermediation in connection with practical training and subsequent employment of vulnerable youth in the rural area presents an example of articulation of the available educational environments of the school-based and work-based learning for the sake of empowerment. A school implementing the vocational training model of apprenticeship, usually chooses individuals who have not only professional but also didactic-pedagogical competences as company trainers, therefore they respond to teenagers in the social exclusion group sufficiently sensitively (empathetically). VET schools also provide training to master trainers by developing their didactic-pedagogical competences and sensitiveness (empathy) to socially excluded adolescents.

The success of integration of vulnerable students in the WBL and their subsequent employment to a great extent depends on the availability of transversal skills and abilities. Therefore, the above-mentioned intermediation activities in the VET school are supplemented with other different educational projects targeted at the development of employability skills, critical awareness of the labour market, citizenship attitudes, social skills, artistic expression and creativity. All these school activities involve the participation of the local enterprises whose fields of activities are relevant to the content of the school's vocational training programmes.

'We could mention a programme of fostering entrepreneurship skills of our students developed by us. We have established an annual plan of measures with activities to enhance the development of entrepreneurship skills in our programmes; different activities, including skills competitions, exhibitions, visits to enterprises, are implemented.' (focus group from Lithuania).

'Another programme is dedicated to the citizenship and national identity development, and is designed for general education. Activities in this programme are executed together with the students' council, different events are initiated and organized by this council, dedicated to different topics of civil society, memorable dates etc. The programme of social skills development is intended for special needs students' (focus group from Lithuania).

Artistic education is also used as a propaedeutic measure for special needs students. Such propaedeutic approaches as combining artistic education and empirical exploration exercises in the acquisition of vocational knowledge and development of skills are applied:

'We also have another teacher of biology, who is a qualified florist and trains kids to make these artistic floral arrangements which we have shown you, different canvas, compositions created from the pieces provided by nature. Students often go out for nature observations, collect materials and then work with them. We also have technology teachers who combine carpentry and wood carving in training special needs students. Students get strongly involved in wood carving and produce very artistic and original pieces of art' (focus group from Lithuania).

In the case of training special needs students by applying propaedeutic vocational pedagogical approaches of introducing and permitting “to try” an activity in a given occupation, it is considered a suitable pedagogical strategy for their empowerment:

“These can be very simple occupations and work processes, but students must like them and know how to proceed with them. Another way is letting a special needs student to try different work processes and occupations and then to pick the most suitable. In our social skills development programme, we introduce different occupations. In the period of three years, students learn carpentry, floristry, different technologies, repair of electric equipment, repair of white goods, construction and repair of buildings, metalworking, and sewing. So, the programme is very broad, students can experience the variety of activities and teachers can observe which occupations are most suitable for them. Occupational choice is usually supported and even performed by the family, and in case of special needs and vulnerable students it is executed by the school. It is very important for us to assist in employing such students, because it helps their social integration. For example, we employed one such former student as a cleaner of premises. She graduated from the programme and we are very happy with her work “(focus group from Lithuania).

Integration of social and vocational education and training is considered an effective pedagogical strategy for empowerment of special needs students:

‘A few years ago, there was an idea to develop a social education programme for special needs students in the field of vocational education. Our idea is to provide vocational education together with social education (in parallel). Now there is a project called “You have an occupation – you have future” and our psychologist and social pedagogue, with the help of our VET teachers, will develop educational content (lessons) for such programme. Two modules have been prepared – one deals with work-based learning, the other – with introduction to the labour market and social life ‘(focus group from Lithuania).

To conclude, the integration of vocational skills development, general education and development of key competencies, as well as application of propaedeutic pedagogical approaches are the central elements of empowering pedagogy applied in the VET centre in Lithuania.

The case of empowerment practices in *Latvia* illustrates the efforts of schools to provide systemic pedagogical support to vulnerable students with the focus on the immediate availability and personalization of such pedagogical support. These goals are attained through the introduction of the system of early identification of the needs in pedagogical, sociopsychological and other support to vulnerable students in the classrooms, supplemented with the new role of group mentors. Such a system prevents the risk of students getting frustrated with not knowing who to speak to in a difficult situation, especially if they face several types of problems, e.g. academic, social, etc., at the same time. Another important aspect is that the student can trust the person (mentor), because the staff position has been specifically designed for this purpose.

Teachers highly appreciate the introduction of group educators (mentors) available all the time, whom young people can turn to at any time. This is considered a very successful solution, as problems can be identified and addressed fast and in an individualized and targeted way. Teachers working with such students have confirmed:

“...students come to me for consultations from early morning till evening. They have the need for such conversation as often they cannot speak with their parents and other family members due their absence or work abroad, or the student does not live with the family or for other reasons” (focus group from Latvia).

The group mentor is specially trained to deal with these problems. He knows how to deal with the issues internally, how to forward the information or to whom to convey the problem and look for solutions. In order to implement a systemic approach and monitoring of the interventions, the group mentors draw-up an individual early leaving risk management/ reduction plan according to the assessed risks. In practice, the group mentor conducts individual interviews with the student, parents, or legal representatives of the student, to fix the situation. Group mentors are supported by the school in providing specific, almost tailor-made training and competence development. The national ESF funded PUMPURS project provides such training opportunities. The PUMPURS project is an example of good European practice at a regional level. The results of the project differ, the support varies by region, e.g. Ventspils differs from Latgale.

The focus groups convened in *Latvia* allowed to distinguish the following pedagogical factors of empowering vulnerable VET learners:

1. Seeing education as a value and motivating vulnerable students to learn is an important challenge: *“Education is not a value for many such students; ‘such students do not learn, have no motivation”.*
2. Group mentors, available all the time for the students play the key role. *“Young people can turn to a mentor at any time. This is considered a very successful solution as problems can be identified well and quickly”.*
3. The provision of continuous individualised pedagogical support for the students with learning difficulties and health disorders. *“Special individualised learning support is provided to students having learning difficulties and health problems.”*
4. Applying WBL approaches based on the state funded apprenticeship courses. *“Work-based vocational*

education fits really well to these students.” In addition to the pedagogical benefits, in terms of practical skills and know-how valuable for employment, WBL also “provides motivating financial remuneration for students for their work done”.

- a. Flexibility of the learning pathways enabled by the modular structure of the VET curricula and leading to the recognition of learning outcomes and acquired qualifications of different volume of learning is also considered an effective empowering factor: *“A learner who is unable to complete a full qualification in 4 years shall acquire, for example, a locksmith’s qualification after 2-3 years, then, continuing to study another 1-2 years, they shall acquire a motor mechanic’s qualification, or the qualification for a sewing operator, etc. This is just an excellent solution for entering the labour market.”*
5. Provision of career guidance and counselling for vulnerable learners: *“The support of a career counsellor is also very important for such students, especially when they cannot get such kind of guidance from their parents or families.”*

4. Discussion

The present research has revealed that the family and socioeconomic environment (poverty, lack of family support, etc.) of vulnerable VET students impose rather limited personal aims in choosing vocational education as the shortest pathway to employment helping to attain subsistence and basic existential life values (Sartre 1949). Difficult living conditions of vulnerable learners also shape different internal (subconscious) obstacles for learning and employment, such as negative learning experiences, lack of self-confidence, psychological traumas, etc. (Jossberger et al., 2010; Roos et al., 2021). One of the key starting points of the analysed empowering pedagogical practices in Lithuania and Latvia is identification of the factors of social exclusion of learners and understanding of the restrictive and destructive implications of these factors for learning in the VET school. VET teachers and support pedagogical staff (social pedagogues and psychologists) play the crucial role here. Another important element of these practices is helping learners to understand themselves in the context of social relationships and provision of pedagogical assistance and personalised guidance for learning at school and at the workplaces. The empowering role of the VET curriculum emerges and manifests here via the flexibility of the structure of the curriculum (competence-based modules, micro-credentials), integration of education and development of key skills, attitudes and values in the VET curriculum, etc. This conforms to the findings of other studies on the empowering effects of the VET curricula (Hordern et al., 2022; Young and Hordern, 2022). This research has also revealed that autonomy of VET teaching staff and VET schools in curriculum design is highly important in enabling the empowering effect of VET curricula, whereas the centralization and unification of curriculum design becomes an important obstacle – this also corresponds with the findings of the study by Tütlys and Vaitkutė (2022). The main targets for the empowerment of learners in the analysed pedagogical practices in Lithuania and Latvia are the provision of vocational qualifications and the personal development of vulnerable learners. This requires special efforts on the part of the VET teaching staff to provide guidance, mediation and counselling to vulnerable learners during their transition into practical training and employment. Neoliberal employment relations in Lithuania and Latvia offer low-skilled employment opportunities and the short-term profit orientation of the human resource management strategies of enterprises creates the risk for vulnerable learners to just dropout and become trapped in the low-skill, low wage jobs. Therefore, empowering VET practices seek to enable and encourage learners to reasonably choose sustainable pathways of practical training and employment (Fig. 1).

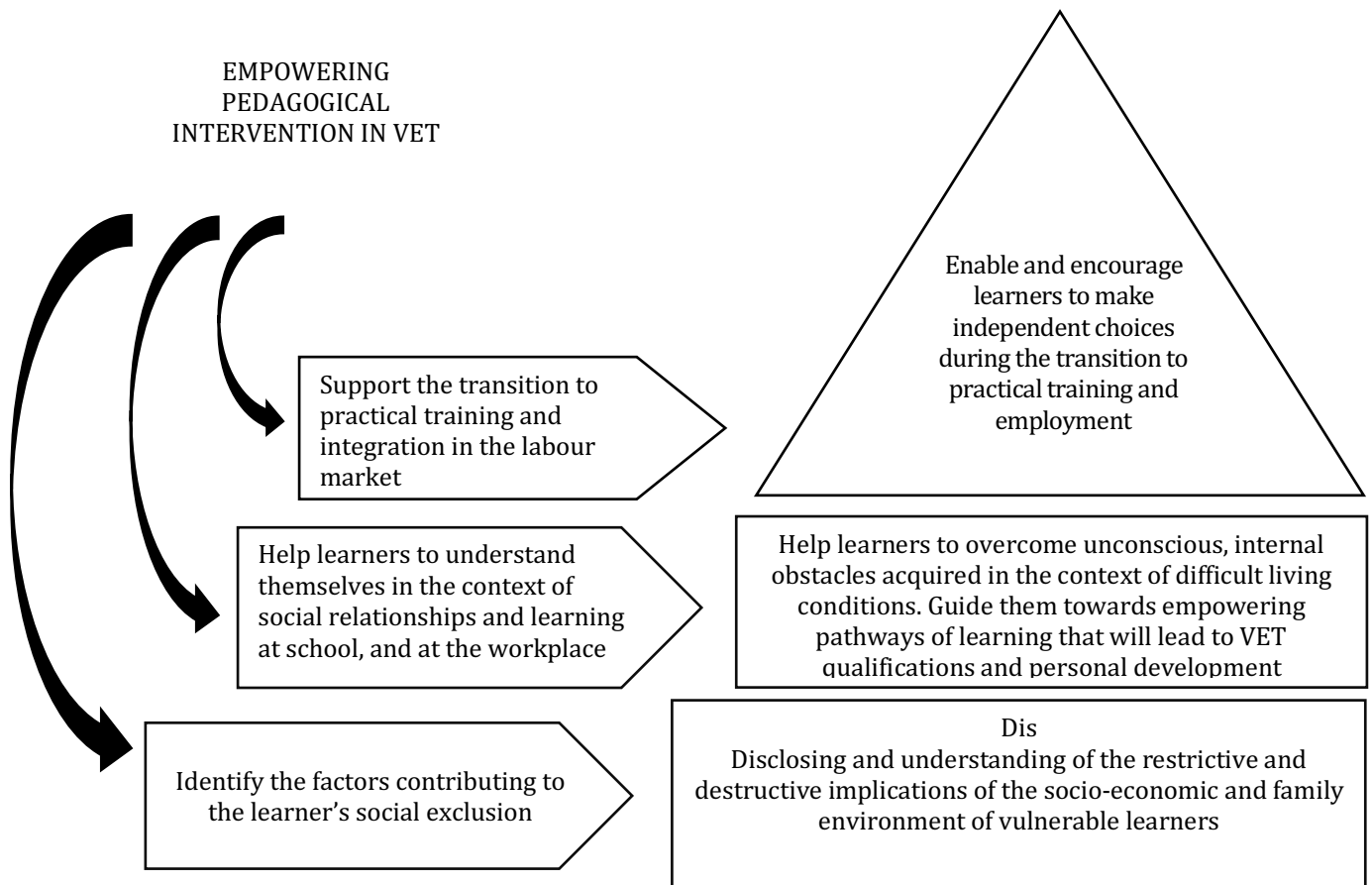


Fig.1 Empowering pedagogical interventions in VET

5. Conclusion

The practices analysed, cover various factors of empowerment for at-risk youth related to the pedagogical relationship between students and teaching staff, the propaedeutic effects of work-based learning and work itself, participation in the school communities and the support of peers, and systemic pedagogical, psychological, and social support procured by the national policy measures. The evidence concerning the impact of these practices and their effectiveness in empowering at-risk VET students, is still rather fragmented. In particular, concerning the potential of these measures to respond to the key problems that define social risks and the exclusion of youth, such as poverty, disparities of social-economic development between cities and rural regions, policies on the provision of social support to youth and children. It requires further in-depth study.

In case of the analysed measures in Lithuania, it is possible to highlight several important insights regarding the relationship between the institutional and pedagogical factors of VET empowerment measures:

1. The priority of the VET schools' social and educational mission to provide VET based on purely economic goals related to development of human capital for the labour market does not exclude the accomplishment of the "economic mission". On the contrary, VET school in the rural region plays the role of key provider of skills and succeeds in establishing durable partnerships with local enterprises, including immediate channels of communication on the skills needs and other issues (part time employment of VET teachers in the companies).

2. The flexibility and individualisation of the pedagogical approaches applied while empowering vulnerable learners must seek to compensate or outweigh various institutional challenges and difficulties faced by the school to nevertheless, empower vulnerable learners (e.g. challenges of adjusting the provision of locally relevant vocational training to the narrowly specialised modular curricula, a lack of institutional preconditions for the proper organisation of apprenticeships, etc.). Here the VET teachers become key protagonists of support to help change the situation.

In the Latvian case, one can notice the combination of the national support measures with the individualized pedagogical measures for the empowerment of vulnerable students. The capacity building of teaching staff provided by the PUMPURS project facilitates the provision of individualized pedagogical and psychological support for the vulnerable students. This looks like an effective and sustainable practice of empowerment, at least, in the short and medium-term perspective. However, in the long-term, this combination of empowerment

practices risks being compromised by the shortage of teaching staff. Another serious challenge to the sustainable pedagogical empowerment of vulnerable students based on work-based learning and apprenticeship, is the lack of engagement from enterprises in the VET provision in general, something that essentially narrows the accessibility of work-based learning to vulnerable students.

All measures highlight the central role of VET teachers and other teaching staff members in empowering at-risk VET students. This exposes the issue of their capacity and the capacity building needs to deal with the challenge of increasing the volume of at-risk students in VET schools. The results of the study show the abandonment of standardization and the narrowing down of specialization, increasing use of an individual approach to pedagogical practices in VET. Emphasis is placed on expanding the scope and individualization of the applied pedagogical practices for at-risk students. Increased attention is being paid to the living conditions of at-risk students outside school, addressing students' social problems, the development of key skills and attitudes, coaching and methods of individual co-operation.

The findings of the analysis of the empowerment practices of the VET schools also points to the importance of institutional support for the VET establishments in design, implementation and in particular the maintenance of these practices. The VET systems of Lithuania and Latvia seek to provide such institutional support and the related capacity building of VET providers through EU funded projects (the PUMPURS project in Latvia), which raises some issues and problems for long-term sustainability of these practices. Neoliberally designed and market oriented institutional reforms of the VET provision tend to delegate all responsibilities of support to vulnerable students to the VET schools themselves. It enables VET schools to individualise and to adjust the pedagogical support and interventions of empowerment of the vulnerable learners. However, it also requires support of VET schools in terms of resources, especially human resources. PUMPURS project in Latvia is a good example of such support, what is largely missing in Lithuania.

Future research perspectives in this area are very broad. They concern various research problems and topics, including the research of relations between the development of such VET practices and institutional pathways for skill formation systems and skill ecosystems (Buchanan et al., 2017; Tütlys et al., 2022), research into the agency of VET providers and social partners in the design, implementation and development of such practices, as well as the implications for VET reforms (e.g. the implementation of competence-based VET curricula, learner-centred VET pedagogy, and the provision of relevant resources for institutional and pedagogical changes) and related institutional changes for this agency. The potential of such empowering VET practices when dealing with the global challenges related to migration, the integration of forced migrants and dealing with increases in global workforce mobility, as well as the adaptability of such practices to the requirements posed by the technological and environmental challenges (digitalization and green course developments), could also be highly relevant topics for future research.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

*The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: **introduction:** Aivaras Anužis **literature review:** Aivaras Anužis; **methodology:** Genutė Gedvilienė; Sigita Daukila, Biruta Sloka, Ilze Buligina **result and discussion:** Genutė Gedvilienė; Sigita Daukila, Biruta Sloka, Ilze Buligina **conclusion:** Genutė Gedvilienė; Sigita Daukila, Biruta Sloka, Ilze Buligina. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.*

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