A Phenomenographic Study On The Use Of Strength-Based Pedagogy In The Context Of Special Education Teachers' Professional Well-Being In Finland

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Abstract

Teacher well-being and occupational endurance receive significant media attention and are widely discussed within professional communities in Finland. Teachers experiencing burnout is a societally concerning phenomenon. How could teacher well-being be improved?

Strength-based pedagogy has come strongly to the fore in the field of education and teaching. The core curriculum for basic education in Finland requires the utilization of strengths as part of teaching. Highlighting and utilizing strengths enables every student to experience their own uniqueness. A positive and strength-based atmosphere also helps teachers to endure better in their work and helps them discover their own strengths as well.

This study investigated the experiences and observations of special education teachers regarding the use of strength-based pedagogy in teaching, using a phenomenographic research approach. The results showed that the use of strengths supports not only student development but also teacher's professional well-being using it, the development of professional skills, and creates a positive attraction towards the work.

The study examined the effects of using strength-based pedagogy on the professional well-being of special education teachers. The special education teachers experienced increased work motivation, strengthened professional self-esteem, and reduced workload. Additionally, the importance of collegial support emerged. The special education teachers emphasized the significance of support from the work community, as a teacher's work is strongly contextual and takes place within the school community.

A teacher's professional development is a continuous process during which the teacher's personality and identity develop. The special education teachers interviewed for the study had chosen strength-emphasizing teaching of their own volition and felt it had changed their entire way of thinking and acting as a teacher. This change in mindset positively affected their own professional well-being and provided new tools for challenging situations.

Keywords: special education teacher, professional well-being, positive pedagogy, strength-based pedagogy

1. Introduction

In terms of occupational well-being and teacher resilience, it is crucial to identify factors that enhance teachers' ability to thrive in their work. One perspective on this is the application of positive pedagogy in education. The principles of positive pedagogy include recognizing students' strengths and virtues, as well as promoting their well-being. This approach is also referred to as strength-based pedagogy, which is part of positive education.

For a teacher to effectively educate their students about strengths and well-being, it is essential that they themselves are genuinely believe in what they teach. In the interviews conducted for this study, the participating special education teachers expressed a strong personal interest in using

positive pedagogy. Teachers' work and practices evolve alongside societal structures, reforms, and developments. For this reason, schools need forward-thinking professionals who take pride in their work and possess both the skills and the motivation to educate future experts for the labour market. The need for this in Finland is significant, as PISA results indicate a decline in Finnish students' learning outcomes (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2024), and the number of early school leavers threatens to grow further. Ongoing reforms in learning support, changing curricula and learning environments, and technological advancements require teachers to develop strategies to adapt to societal changes.

In the hectic daily life of teaching, it is important for educators to listen to themselves, monitor their own well-being, and learn to be compassionate toward themselves. Teacher resilience is such a socially significant issue that it should be taken seriously. The performance-driven culture of society increases the need to recognize and utilize individual strengths. Making strengths visible and fostering their development in the school environment is part of the current core curriculum in basic education.

The aim of this study was to explore how special education teachers perceive the impact of teaching strengths on their own professional well-being. The research was conducted using qualitative methods with a phenomenographic approach, interviewing special education teachers who implement strength-based pedagogy in their work. While previous research has examined the effects of strength-based pedagogy on students and their self-concept, the connection between teachers' own well-being and the use of strengths has so far been studied relatively little.

2. Positive Pedagogy and Character Strengths-Based Teaching

Several parallel terms are used for positive pedagogy. Seligman et al. (2009) use the term positive education, while O'Bryan & Blue (2017) refer to it as positive pedagogy. In Finnish discourse, both strength-based pedagogy (vahvuuspedagogiikka) and positive pedagogy (positiivinen pedagogiikka) are used interchangeably. When presenting the data and findings of this study, we will use the term strength-based pedagogy.

School plays a crucial role in fostering the well-being of children and young people. Traditional thinking often views school primarily as a place for knowledge acquisition, but well-being goes hand in hand with learning. The Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014) emphasizes the importance of utilizing strengths as part of education, ensuring that no student feels worthless or incompetent. To strengthen students' self-esteem and self-confidence in the school environment, it is essential for educators to understand the significance of recognition and positive feedback. At the same time, students must learn that recognition requires effort and resilience.

Positive pedagogy has also faced criticism. Strength-based pedagogy may raise concerns about an overly optimistic, "rose-tinted" approach to education, where stressful and unpleasant experiences—as well as negative emotions—are overlooked. However, this is not the intention of the positive pedagogy. Positive, strengths-based teaching does not solely focus on happiness and positive emotions. Life inherently involves adversities and various challenges. Sometimes, negative experiences can even be more beneficial for learning and growth than positive ones. The purpose of strength-based pedagogy is thus to learn how to confront and process undesirable experiences and emotions through the identification of one's own strengths. The goal is also to cultivate a positive and open-minded attitude toward oneself and others. For example, feelings of guilt may lead individuals to reflect on the difference between right and wrong, while anxiety may drive them to seek solutions (Leskisenoja, 2017, p. 12). The focus lies in discovering one's strengths, receiving support through positive pedagogy, and finding ways to confront and manage these negative experiences.

Through respectful behaviour, a teacher communicates to students that they and their thoughts are important and valued. Additionally, asking questions, offering encouragement, and active listening are key elements of strength-based teaching (Avola & Pentikäinen, 2020, pp. 77–82). The foundation is the teacher's own willingness to adapt their attitudes, methods, and behaviour through continuous self-reflection. Based on her own experience, Leskisenoja (2016) notes that teachers hold the keys to unlocking opportunities for teaching well-being. The teaching methods employed by educators can influence students'

opportunities to experience success, self-confidence, and courage. Strength-based teaching signals to students that their teacher cares, fosters a sense of community in the classroom, and brings new meaning to their relationship with school and learning.

Teachers' job satisfaction, subjective well-being, and commitment to their work increase when they apply their own strengths (Harzer & Ruch, 2012; Crabb, 2011). According to Norrish et al. (2013), using positive pedagogy in teaching generates positive emotions for teachers during the workday. Teachers may experience a sense of flourishing when they feel valued for their work and important in their professional community. These factors directly contribute to a teacher's balanced mental well-being.

Laine (2010) highlights barriers that make differentiation difficult or are perceived as challenging. These include concerns about the workload of differentiation, fear of parental attitudes, doubts about one's own resilience, lack of ready-made materials or personal expertise, insufficient support from leadership, and fragmented curricula (Laine, 2010, p. 5). At times, teachers may also feel frustration, as their efforts and the school's investment in students' talents often bear fruit only years later (Uusikylä, 2006, p. 32).

Familiarizing oneself with strength-based pedagogy and shifting one's mindset may take time initially. However, integrating it into one's teaching practice generates positive energy, resilience, and professional enthusiasm, which—at its best—

sustains daily work, provides support, and becomes a natural part of school life.

3. Strength Theories

Strength-based teaching is rooted in multiple theories dating from the 1980s to the present day (Gardner, 1983; Uusikylä, 2005; Hoerr, 2000). These theories are closely interconnected. Many cultural values, idealized goals, and talents form the foundation of character strengths. The application of strength theories benefits both students' and teachers' well-being. Through these theories, teachers can better understand and develop their own strengths while enhancing their ability to recognize positive qualities in others. Acknowledging and articulating these positive aspects promotes well-being bidirectionally - benefiting both the giver and receiver.

When exploring positive pedagogy, one encounters various theories and frameworks such as VIA (Values in Action) and PERMA. These both share a common foundation in individual strengths and positive thinking patterns, emphasizing human potential for personal growth. The VIA classification of character strengths includes six virtues: 1) wisdom and knowledge (creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective), 2) courage (bravery, persistence, honesty, zest), 3) humanity (interpersonal strengths for caring relationship), 4) justice (civic strengths for community well-being), 4) temperance (mercy, modesty, prudence, self-control), and 5) transcendence (strengths connecting to meaning beyond the self) (VIA Institute on character, 2022) (Figure 1).

WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE	COURAGE	HUMANITY
- Creativity - Curiosity - Perspective - Love of Learning - Open-mindedness	- Honesty - Persistence - Bravery - Zest	- Interpersonal strengths for caring relationship
VIA Classification of character strengths and virtues		
JUSTICE	TEMPERANCE	TRANSCENDENCE
- Civic strengths for community well-being	- Self-control - Mercy - Prudence - Modesty	- Strengths connecting to meaning beyond the self

Figure 1. VIA classification of character strengths and virtues.

VIA provides theoretically grounded tools for practical work, supporting positive pedagogy in

schools. Using these tools to highlight strengths creates a foundation for implementing strength-

based teaching and opening teachers' perspectives to positive pedagogy (Sointu et al., 2018).

Leskisenoja (2016) presents her research framework through Martin Seligman's well-being theory in positive psychology, known as PERMA theory (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) (Figure 2). While happiness contributes to well-being, it alone doesn't provide life meaning.

PERMA theory identifies five core elements - foundational pillars of positive psychology - that each independently promote well-being and happiness, while often enhancing other components through mutual reinforcement (Seligman, 2011). Research shows that character strengths and their utilization serve as background factors for well-being and facilitate the realization of PERMA components (Norrish et al., 2013).
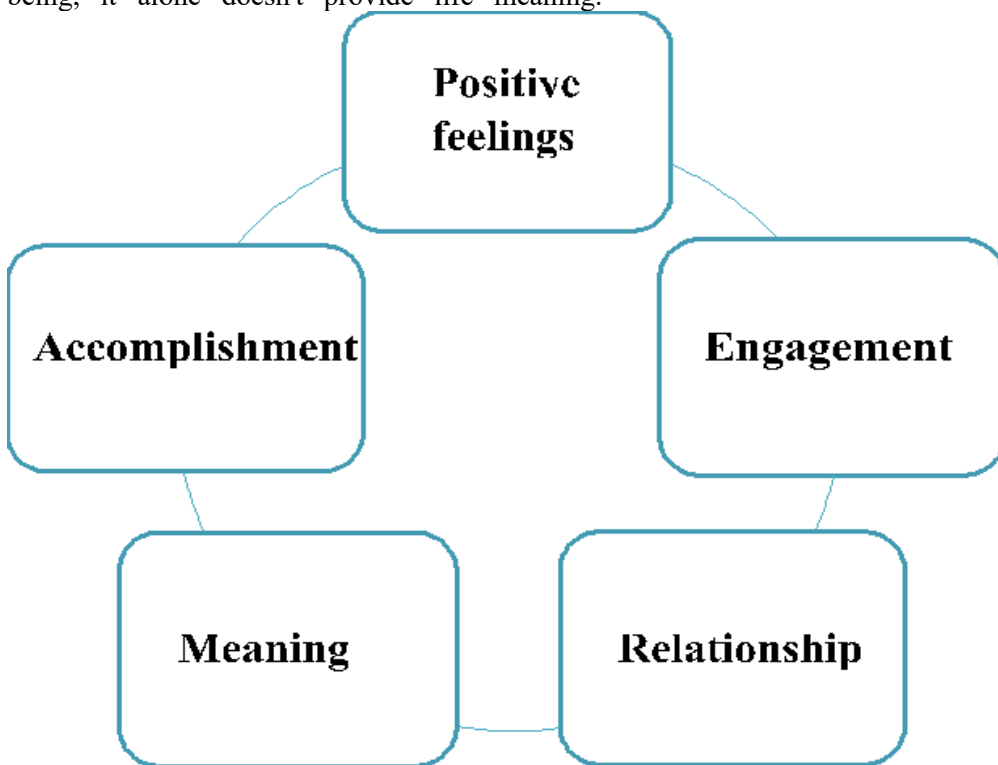

Figure 2. PERMA's five factors.

Seligman et al. (2005) studied how positive psychology interventions increased happiness, defined through three PERMA components: positive emotions, engagement, and meaning. The web-based study involved over 400 participants, including a control group. Participants completed assigned interventions, with two of five interventions showing lasting effects - reducing depressive symptoms and increasing happiness six months later. These interventions involved writing down three good daily events with explanations for a week and using personal strengths in new ways daily. Continued voluntary practice of interventions further increased happiness. The study demonstrated that focusing on positive experiences, successes, and expanded use of strengths brought lasting happiness (Seligman et al., 2005).

Strength-based positive pedagogy effectively cultivates positive emotions. Focusing on strengths and positive aspects enhances positive feelings, which Seligman (2011) considers the most crucial element. People experiencing positive emotions find social relationship-building easier than negative thinkers, likely because positive emotions affect relationships and behavior differently.

International research often divides engagement into three interconnected components: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Avola and Pentikäinen (2020, p. 185) define engagement as concentration, immersion, presence, and living in the moment through listening, doing, learning, or interacting. This involves commitment to action and increased

motivation. When teachers feel passionate about their work, they may experience flow states.

Relationships significantly impact well-being. Strengthening qualities like friendliness, love, forgiveness, self-regulation, social intelligence, teamwork skills, and empathy improves interaction and relationship skills (Avola & Pentikäinen, 2020, pp. 212-214). Strength-based communication can enhance social relationships. Kern et al. (2014) found that teachers commit to their work and experience job satisfaction when having meaningful school relationships.

While quick achievement dominates modern thinking, PERMA's accomplishment concept connects to long-term perspectives like perseverance and resilience (Norrish, 2015, p. 245). Using strength-based language should increase individuals' sense of meaning and purpose.

Goal setting and striving require meaningful objectives. Self-set goals create meaning, while realistic, solution-focused goal definition emphasizing future possibilities (rather than problems) facilitates success (Avola & Pentikäinen, 2020, pp. 315-318). Achievements then foster persistence. Utilizing character strengths supported by other PERMA components facilitates setting and achieving personally meaningful goals (Leskisenoja, 2016). Teachers' sense of meaning grows throughout the school community, and recognizing personal strengths becomes easier when strength-based pedagogy is implemented (Seligman, 2011; Peterson & Seligman 2004).

Recently, PERMA theory added a sixth component (+H for Health), encompassing sleep, recovery, exercise, and nutrition. Childhood and adolescent health and well-being correlate with adult outcomes (Norrish et al., 2013).

Each PERMA component independently enhances well-being while mutually reinforcing others. Physical health, perseverance, meaning, relationships, engagement, and positive emotions strengthen through this reciprocal process, creating an upward spiral that particularly supports teacher well-being through positive pedagogy.

Substantial research supports PERMA. Its implementation provides teachers with multiple well-being benefits. Pinter's (2024) classroom research describes how teachers reported PERMA use generated positive work emotions and more open student relationships, while making work feel more purposeful and meaningful. Teacher commitment also strengthened. Shanmugan & Hidayat (2022, p. 153) examined PERMA's impact on 274 Malaysian teachers' lifelong learning, further demonstrating its benefits.

4. The Impact of Strengths-Based Approaches on Teachers' Occupational Well-being

Teacher burnout in educational work is a topic that consistently emerges in Finland - media discussions and staff room conversations. The issue is so socially significant that it requires urgent attention and solutions. What exactly exhausts teachers, and how can it be prevented?

Wood et al. (2011) studied the effects of strengths-based approaches on well-being. Their results indicated that utilizing strengths increased employees' self-esteem and vitality while reducing stress (Wood et al., 2011). In his doctoral dissertation, Aho (2010) examined teachers' coping skills in their work. The research identified four distinct coping profiles emphasizing individuality. Among these, the intrapersonal developer profile emerged as the most comprehensive coping strategy. This profile highlights self-awareness, recognition of personal aspirations and needs, and active efforts to fulfill them. Additionally, coping is influenced by personal traits such as optimism, interpersonal skills, creativity, and self-confidence (Aho, 2010, p. 6).

Soini, Pietarinen and Pyhältö (2008) also address teacher well-being and resilience. Teachers identified interactions with students—including pedagogical challenges, problem-solving situations, and their resolutions—as the most significant factor influencing their endurance. Onnismaa's (2010) review similarly highlighted teacher-student, colleague, and parent-teacher relationships as major stressors. In these interactions, teachers' agency—their ability to assume an active role—proved crucial. Proactive anticipation and strong social situational awareness supported problem-solving and, consequently, teacher resilience (Onnismaa, 2010). Restricted agency increased stress (Soini et al., 2008), suggesting that leveraging personal strengths, resources, and a willingness to develop effective problem-solving models could enhance well-being. Such an approach aligns with pedagogy that integrates student learning and well-being, which

was found to support teachers' resilience (Soini et al., 2008).

Leskisenoja (2016) boldly asserts that integrating positive pedagogy into classroom and school culture prevents and reduces staff burnout. Her research observed significant improvements in classroom relationships, workflow efficiency, and home-school collaboration. Additionally, positive pedagogy provided her with resources and renewed energy to navigate challenges in education and her own teaching practice (Leskisenoja, 2016).

Avola and Pentikäinen (2020) emphasize teachers' personal well-being when teaching strengths to students. Institutional and collegial support is vital, as is the teacher's responsibility for self-care (Avola & Pentikäinen, 2020). Aho (2010) identifies skills and themes in his dissertation that overlap with strengths-based teaching, proposing a coping model where professional development plays a key role. Given the balancing act of teaching, resilience—the ability to adapt to adversity—is essential. Sieland (2007, p. 207) argues that teachers need resilience to navigate challenges for both them and their students.

How can one teach strengths to others without recognizing or naming their own? Perhaps strengths-based pedagogy could be the unifying thread in professional development, fostering resilience and a sense of achievement not only for students but also for teachers. Exhaustion escalates when teachers lack workplace support, risking the reduction of strengths-based pedagogy to just another bureaucratic demand. Yet, research highlights teachers' experiences of increased motivation and positive engagement through strengths-based practices.

Teachers grow professionally by identifying and nurturing students' strengths, which refines their own attitudes and perceptions. Studies (e.g., Norrish et al., 2018) describe how teachers experience flourishing—professional growth marked by positive emotions, recognition, and a sense of belonging in their work community. Flourishing signifies psychological well-being and positive mental health.

Positive mental health, synonymous with mental well-being, is a resource that can be cultivated. Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al. (2016, p. 1759) posit that mental health is integral to overall well-being. Flourishing individuals exhibit high levels of emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Positive mental health is a dynamic capacity to be developed and harnessed.

5. Study Implementation, Methodology, Research Ethics, and Reliability

5.1. Research Question
How do special education teachers perceive the impact of teaching strengths on their own professional well-being?

5.2 Phenomenography as an Analysis Method
The research data were analyzed using the phenomenographic approach. Phenomenography is a qualitative research method or framework developed by Ference Marton (Marton, 1986). While originally designed for educational research, it is also widely used in other human sciences. According to Marton (1994) phenomenography is an empirical research approach aimed at identifying and describing the limited and qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena and aspects of the world around us are experienced, conceptualized, understood, perceived, and apprehended. In the process of phenomenographic analysis these different modes of experiences, understandings, and so forth are assembled into "categories of description" (Marton 1994, p. 4424).

According to Marton (1988) categories of description are relational, experiential, content-orientated and qualitative. Categories of description are experiential because they express the informant's own way of experiencing a phenomenon (noesis). They are relational because the ontological concern in phenomenography is the relation between consciousness and reality (Uljens, 1996, p. 114). Categories of description reflect the relationship between the informant and subject (the issue; noema), They are content-oriented because they deal with the meaning of the phenomenon (intentionality of consciousness). They are qualitative because they depict phenomenon through concepts and not through numbers. In phenomenographic report these categories of description are graphically represented in a figure or table, which is called as outcome space.

The purpose of phenomenographic research is not to explain how things are but rather to understand how informants—in this case, special education teachers—conceive of how things are. Phenomenography distinguishes between first-

order and second-order perspectives (Marton, 1994, p. 4424). A first-order perspective involves direct orientation toward the world and making claims about it, whereas a second-order perspective focuses on people's conceptions of the world (i.e., conceptions of others' conceptions) (Marton, 1981, p. 178).

When phenomenography investigates people's conceptions, it is also necessary to consider what it means to hold a certain conception and whether there can be different degrees of it. According to Marton & Booth (1997), having a particular understanding of something means being aware of it (awareness). However, awareness of something is not a binary distinction—being aware versus not being aware. Rather, it is a continuum in which some things are in the foreground, that is, consciously explicated and thematized, while others remain in the background as implicit and non-thematized. Marton (1994) refers here to Aron Gurwitsch's (1964) work The Field of Consciousness. Gurwitsch's understanding of foreground of consciousness and background of consciousness, in turn, has been influenced by Martin Heidegger's distinction between present-at-hand and ready-to-hand (Heidegger, 1927/1962, §18). In a certain sense, we are aware of everything all the time, but in a given situation, we perceive the world through a particular perspective. Each context and situation have its own relevance structure, which brings certain things to the foreground while pushing others into the background. How a situation is perceived and interpreted is influenced by prior experiences and understandings. According to Marton (1994), the aim of phenomenographic research is to study the different ways in which we are aware of a particular phenomenon, taking account the relevance structure of the given situation and context (Marton 1994, p. 4427).

5.3 Data Collection
The thematic interviews used in this study followed an open-ended questioning approach, which is essential for uncovering diverse conceptions within the data. The goal of phenomenographic analysis is to identify structural differences in participants' conceptions, clarifying their relationship to the phenomenon under study—that is, to describe the variation in how the phenomenon is perceived. Participants may hold multiple, context-dependent conceptions of the phenomenon.
The data were collected by interviewing eight special education teacher or special class teachers

working in different parts of Finland, who emphasize strength-based pedagogy in their teaching and focus on helping their students in special support to identify and utilize their strengths. The informants were special education teachers or special class teachers, collectively referred to in this study as special education teachers or informants. We included interviewees who held the title of special class teacher or special education teacher, regardless of their educational or qualification background. However, we hoped that the interviewees would have at least a few years of experience working with students in need of special support in a teaching role.

We recruited the interviewees from the Erkkamaikat and Huomaa hyvä! Facebook groups. In the autumn of 2022, we posted a preliminary idea about the topic in these groups and inquired about potential participants interested in joining our study. We revisited the matter at the end of 2022, and all those who had initially expressed interest were still willing to participate as interviewees. The interviews began in January 2023.

The interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams between January and February 2023. Prior to the interviews, the participants received a privacy notice, a condensed research plan, and an interview framework. This allowed the interviewees to familiarize themselves with the themes and open-ended questions in advance. During the actual interviews, a conversational atmosphere prevailed, meaning the discussions proceeded dialogically, loosely following the interview framework while allowing for clarifying follow-up questions based on the interviewees' responses.

A total of 344 minutes of interview material was collected. The material was transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions excluded introductory remarks, closing acknowledgments, and any off-topic comments. The transcribed text amounted to 82 pages in A4 format, with a 12-point Times New Roman font and 1.5 line spacing.

5.4 Formation of Categories of Description
The authors engaged in a dialogue regarding the relationship between units of meaning and categories of description. Based on this dialogue, a phenomenographic outcome space was constructed, aligning with the research questions and theoretical framework. Åkerlind (2012, p. 125)

refers to this quality reflection process as dialogic reliability checking.

Table 1: Categories of description. The impact of teaching strengths on one's own work well-being.

The impact of teaching strengths on one's own work well-being		
Category 1: Development of self-esteem and personal strengths	**Category 2:** Work engagement and motivation (PERMA) - Positive emotions - Commitment - Relationships - Meaningfulness - Achievement	**Category 3:** Sources of workload and stress

Some categories of description were formed inductively (data-driven), while others were derived from PERMA theory (theory-driven). The following categories emerged from the data:

1. Development of self-awareness and personal strengths
2. Work engagement and motivation
3. Sources of workload and stress

Upon closer analysis, the units of meaning within Category 2 (Work engagement) aligned closely with the five components of PERMA theory. Thus, these units were further coded into subcategories:

1. Positive emotions
2. Commitment
3. Relationships
4. Meaningfulness
5. Achievement.

5.5 Process of data analysis
The analysis in the results chapter follows a theory-guided approach, though with an emphasis on data-driven interpretation. Additionally, the categories of description were arranged non-hierarchically. These two aspects deviate from Marton's (1981) original phenomenographic framework, which insisted on strict data-driven analysis and hierarchical categorization. However, contemporary phenomenographic studies frequently employ non-hierarchical categorization, and the requirement for purely data-driven analysis is no longer absolute.

In the first phase of data analysis, we began by carefully reading through the transcribed material multiple times to gain an overall understanding. During these readings, we extracted expressions we deemed significant (meaning units) into a separate file, keeping the research problem in mind. The material clearly revealed meaningful observations related to occupational well-being, allowing us to compile a substantial number of meaning units relevant to our research question.

In the second phase of analysis, we grouped the significant expressions (meaning units) into preliminary descriptive categories. Some of these categories emerged directly from the data, while others were informed by theory. The informants' responses contained similar expressions, though they sometimes used slightly different phrasing or terminology. By naming these categories, we were able to make finer distinctions between the relationships of meaning units and deliberately assign them to the designated categories.

In the third phase of analysis, we revisited the meaningful expressions and the entire dataset, making notes on their content. This process allowed us to refine the preliminary categories into final descriptive categories

5.5 Reliability of the Study
For the reliability of any qualitative research, it is fundamental how themes, classes, categories, or discourses are formed. The reliability of this study has been enhanced by reporting the entire research process—including the formation of phenomenographic description categories—as thoroughly as possible. Additionally, a crucial aspect of the study's reliability is that the descriptive categories remain faithful to the expressions emerging from the data, even when the categories are theoretically grounded. On the other hand, like Hajar (2021, p. 1431) point out categories of description in the phenomenographic

outcome space reflects both the data and researchers' judgements in interpreting the data. There lies the weakness that example Säljö (1997) has spoken about: "It is argued that it is doubtful if and in what sense the interview data generated in much of the empirical work within this tradition can be assumed to refer to 'ways of experiencing'..." (p. 173).

These themes have been under contentious discussion the phenomenographic literature. According to Hajar (2021, p. 1431) "there are two kinds of validity checks: communicative and pragmatic validity, which are often practised within phenomenographic research". Without going any deeper this quite esoteric discussion of the reliability discourses of phenomenography we in this article make use of both communicative and pragmatic aspect of validity of phenomenographic research. Heikkinen, Huttunen and Syrjälä (2007) created five validation criteria for action research, and they combined the aspects communicative validity and pragmatic validity including also other aspects. For us these five principles of validation were very helpful regardless the fact that they were designed for action research. Heikkinen et. al. (2007, p. 8-9) present five principles of validation action research in following way:

1. The principle of historical continuity views practices and ways of thinking as historically developed and as part of a broader context.

2. The principle of dialectics requires interpretations to be constructed in a polyphonic manner, bringing forth diverse perspectives.

3. The principle of reflexivity acknowledges that the researcher's thinking and interpretations are grounded in their prior life experiences and demands critical reflection on the study's methodology and theoretical framework.

4. The principle of practicality calls for producing research knowledge that offers practical utility for professional practitioners.

5. The principle of evocativeness emphasizes the need to spark the reader's interest.

In recent article Heikkinen & Huttunen (2023) add the principle of adequacy. It requires researchers to write in language that practitioners can understand.

In this research we have tried to follow the principles of historical continuity and reflectivity. Although we have strived for neutral data collection and analysis in this study, our prior perspectives and preconceptions may have influenced both the interview process and our focus during the interviews. For the researchers, the theme of strength-based pedagogy holds significant personal and professional importance, which may have affected the identification (or oversight) of meaning units in the transcribed material. Thus, our personal histories and resulting interests may have shaped this research. However, we have consciously sought to minimize our own assumptions and biases, allowing the voices of the interviewed special education teachers to emerge authentically.

The principle of dialectics was particularly prominent in our analysis, as we examined the results through multiple perspectives to ensure polyphonic interpretation. The principle of practicality was realized through the research outcomes, as we believe the study generates knowledge applicable to, for example, designing in-service teacher training. This principle also manifested in our discussion proposing concrete methods for implementing strength-based pedagogy throughout compulsory education – reflecting its core essence as an educational approach that promotes well-being and future-oriented growth.

While the principle of evocativeness may not have been as strongly achieved, we have endeavoured to write in a thought-provoking manner. The principle of adequacy guided our use of accessible language throughout the study, ensuring clarity in reporting the research process and findings. Our goal has been to produce a written study comprehensible not only to specialists in the field but also to a broader academic audience.

5.6 Research Ethics
This study complies with the guidelines for good scientific practice issued by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2023). The research acknowledges prior findings and theories through appropriate citations, giving due credit to authors and researchers, while striving for meticulous data analysis and transparent reporting of results. Throughout the research process, we have aimed to implement and report methods of data collection, analysis, and evaluation in a detailed and open manner.

Ethical considerations were particularly emphasized regarding the interviews. Participants were informed about:

- The purpose and scope of the study
- How the collected data would be used
- The research methodology

Prior to interviews, participants received:

1. A privacy notice along with the interview framework
2. A request for consent regarding audio/video recording
3. Explicit confirmation of voluntary participation

All personally identifiable information (PII) was systematically excluded:

- During transcription, any potential identifiers mentioned were omitted
- Recordings were stored separately in password-protected files
- All digital traces (recordings, notes with identifiers) have now been securely destroyed

No data enabling identification of individual participants or their specific viewpoints were retained in the research materials.

6. Results – Special Education Teachers' Experiences of the Impact of Strengths-Based Approaches on Their Professional Well-Being

Teacher resilience and occupational well-being are familiar topics in both staffroom discussions and media headlines. While the informants discussed time spent on workload and planning, the special education teachers participating in this study reported minimal stress related to these tasks. When the topic and time invested were perceived as interesting and professionally enriching, few negative remarks emerged. They viewed strengths-based pedagogy as aligned with their personal values, reinforcing their professional identity and well-being. Consequently, teachers experienced a heightened sense of meaning in their work. As noted by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2020), occupational well-being is often measured through the lens of meaningful work.

In this study, exhaustion or burnout was not raised as a concern. Instead, special education teachers described feeling immense motivation and enthusiasm when observing student progress and working in a positive, supportive daily environment. They expressed joy and fulfillment in their roles. Frustration, however, arose only in cases where colleagues or guardians lacked understanding of strengths-based approaches. Challenges related to teacher-student interactions—highlighted by Soini et al. (2008)—were not mentioned in the data. In contrast, misunderstandings about strengths-based pedagogy among colleagues or the school community surfaced in a few interviews. One interviewee also described occasional frustration when justifying to guardians why they had acknowledged positive qualities in a student who exhibited bullying behavior.

6.1 Development of Self-Esteem and Personal Strengths

Research indicates that using strengths in the workplace boosts employees' self-esteem and reduces stress (Wood et al., 2011). In this study, special education teachers also experienced increased well-being and personal growth when applying strength-based pedagogy in their teaching. The teachers felt their professional role and identity had strengthened. Accepting their own incompleteness and recognizing that they would never be professionally "finished" was seen as a positive challenge. There is always room to grow and learn new things.

You can see it in the students too—that I'm an important person to them. (V2)

I think that experimenting means being sensitive enough to choose a direction based on what feels like progress. (V3)

It's brought me the courage to learn new things more boldly. (V3)

In this job, you can never be "done." There's always something new to learn and ways to become a better teacher. (V5)

...I've thought, why didn't I realize this sooner? This strength-based pedagogy has opened up a whole new world for me, even as an experienced teacher. (V5)

When you think about strengths, you also consider the challenges. It brings a very human perspective to things. (V8)

...it's about noticing the small, good things and putting positive experiences into words. (V7)

The interviews revealed that successes and persistent efforts to recognize positive aspects clearly boosted the special education teachers' self-esteem and reinforced their belief that they were on the right path. With increased self-esteem, their tolerance for uncertainty also grew. When a teacher's self-confidence and professional identity are strong, it supports the holistic development of their students.

...it gives me a sense of confidence, like I'm good at my job. (V7)

It's like a virtuous cycle or a loop—the good things, the experiences of success, and the moments when others notice them to help you keep going on the path you've chosen. (V5)

You have to learn to tolerate uncertainty and accept that not everything is under your control. You can't predict everything. You have to dare to try. (V3)

Schools often default to problem- and error-focused language when discussing special education students. These students are easily singled out for their behavioral issues or academic struggles. However, as the interviewed special education teachers grew in professional identity and confidence, they gained the courage to advocate for their students and elevate their status in the eyes of other teachers and the school as a whole.

...a big part of the job is standing up for them, making sure they're accepted. The world isn't ready for their differences yet. (V1)

I make a point of celebrating successes in the staff room—sometimes even exaggerating. Not all adults understand their behavior, and they don't need to. But when you know the student's background, you can highlight even a small positive, like, "Hey, in that situation, they were super honest, even if they used awful language with the supervisor. But then they came to class and told me exactly what happened." (V1)

Often, teachers from parallel classes have been quick to judge. (V3)

The data also highlighted the special education teachers' positive experiences with home-school collaboration. According to this study, cooperation with guardians improved and became easier when meetings weren't just about behavioral issues. Guardians have the right to hear about their child's successes and strengths. When collaboration is built on mutual trust and includes recognition of strengths, it becomes much easier to address academic challenges. Increasing guardians' positive involvement is also simpler when the child's "star moments" are highlighted. As one interviewee aptly put it, praising the child also praises the guardian. From this perspective, building and maintaining effective collaboration with guardians is far easier.

...with special needs children, especially by this age, they've already hit a lot of walls. Their guardians, especially, need to hear their child praised. (V5)

I've also thought about working with guardians—it's been easier to bring up difficult issues when the guardian senses we're on the same side, that the teacher isn't just looking for problems with their child. (V6)

I try to integrate this mindset into all our special education documents and the work we do. (V5)

...I'd argue that a lot of it is because, for example, things work really well with the guardians. (V2)

In the growth of personal strengths, the most prominent theme in this study was the development of a teacher's professional identity. This includes a thirst for learning, applying new knowledge in ways that suit their students' needs, and recognizing the importance of verbalizing strengths and positive experiences. The significance of noticing and articulating good things also emerged in the learning environment, where the strengths of small-group students were highlighted deliberately and purposefully. Without professional self-confidence, advocating for students in this way might not have been easy for special education teachers on their chosen pedagogical path.

6.2 Work Engagement and Motivation

Implementing positive pedagogy in teaching reduces and prevents teacher burnout while improving collaboration with guardians, as mentioned earlier (Leskisenoja, 2016). Vuorinen (2022) also discusses in her dissertation how strength-based knowledge enhances teachers' well-being. The findings of this study align with these perspectives. Work engagement and motivation are examined here through the lens of PERMA theory,

which outlines five pillars of positive psychology that contribute to well-being (Seligman, 2011).

6.2.1 Positive Emotions

The interviews with special education teachers in this study highlighted a strong sense of work engagement, enthusiasm, and appreciation for their profession. They emphasized seizing small moments of success, experiencing fulfillment in their work, and maintaining resilience. Soini et al. (2008) also stress the importance of teachers' sense of control and active role in sustaining motivation. With foresight and situational awareness, many challenges can be resolved positively or even prevented altogether, leading to greater job satisfaction. Every teacher in this study reported feeling more energized when working in a positive environment that emphasized strengths.

I get immense joy from sharing their successes and celebrating even the small victories in our classroom.   (V1)

...It feels so good to see a student stand taller, literally and figuratively. It's wonderful to witness, even if the moment isn't grand—it's the little things. (V7)

The teacher also discovers their own strengths through this process and keeps growing. It brings incredible joy—a kind of joy those who haven't experienced it can't understand. (V3)

I've been surprised by how much this approach helps me stay motivated in my work. (V5)

6.2.2 Commitment

Seligman et al. (2005) have studied how positive psychology interventions increase happiness. One key factor in PERMA theory is commitment. The study found that focusing on strengths, successes, and positive aspects fosters long-term engagement and happiness (Seligman et al., 2005).

In this study, teachers highlighted the importance of noticing even the smallest positive details in daily life. They felt satisfaction in having tools to manage situations and the ability to anticipate and choose the best course of action. Overall, teachers using strength-based pedagogy reported strong commitment and enthusiasm for their work, especially when they saw their students' potential.

...because it helps my students keep going, it helps me keep going too. (V7)
It motivates me in my work. If I had to stick to

traditional textbook teaching, I'd have burned out long ago and looked for another job. (V3)

6.2.3 Relationships

Relationships significantly impact overall well-being. In schools, this includes peer relationships, teacher-student dynamics, and home-school collaboration (Leskisenoja, 2016). The interviewees' passion was evident in their words, gestures, and demeanor. An enthusiastic and well-supported teacher is better equipped to enhance students' well-being and motivation. Additionally, the teachers emphasized the importance of explaining and justifying strength-based pedagogy to colleagues and guardians, ensuring clarity and alignment in teaching practices.

Yes, I even have slides about this for parent evenings so it doesn't come as a surprise to them. (V7)
...I connect with my students, I know them, and our collaboration works. (V7)
Even the school's toughest troublemaker—if you meet them with openness and acknowledge their strengths, it's a gateway to productive collaboration. (V7)

6.2.4 Meaningfulness

The data revealed how special education teachers embraced strength-based pedagogy with insight, desire, and enthusiasm. Supporting students in discovering and developing their strengths through interventions also reinforced the teachers' sense of purpose. Norrish (2015) highlights how teaching and applying strengths in daily life fosters a sense of meaning. The positive outcomes of these interventions deepened the teachers' belief in their work's significance and boosted their engagement.

Some interviewees had long careers and noted that shifting to systematic strength-based teaching reinvigorated their motivation and well-being. Witnessing positive changes in their students strengthened their confidence in their methods. The autonomy of Finnish teachers in choosing their pedagogical approach was also evident.

Strength-based thinking gives me this feeling every morning—like I'm at the starting line, ready to give my best. I look forward to the day, wondering what good things we'll discover together.   (V3)
I tell my students: "No doors are closed to you just because you're in this small group. I want to build a positive future with these words—who knows,

maybe I'm teaching Finland's next president!" (V7)

6.2.5 Achievement

The teachers reported gaining a sense of empowerment through strength-based pedagogy. They felt better equipped to handle the fast-paced, unpredictable school environment. A heightened sense of control boosted their confidence in their professional skills. Unlike feeling tangled in knots, they now held the reins—a result of long-term commitment to this approach (Norrish, 2015).

There's a calmness in knowing I have the tools. (V4)
That sense of control, of leadership—keeping the strings in my hands. (V4)
I've been the one spreading this positive message, and many have joined in. We have a long tradition in special education and a culture of collaboration. (V2)

6.3 Sources of Workload and Stress

Although the interviewed special education teachers used strength-based pedagogy in their teaching, it also brought them certain challenges and frustrations. These frustrations often emerged in situations where the rest of the school community did not share the same pedagogical mindset and practices (cf. the "Relationships" component of PERMA theory). In such cases, special education teachers found themselves having to justify their use of strengths-based approaches to others. Similarly, students could end up in situations where adults in the same school acted inconsistently, which tended to confuse the students. In addition to frustration, special education teachers sometimes experienced feelings of inadequacy or even physical exhaustion from providing emotional support to students.

"Increasing understanding among the teachers in mainstream classrooms—that's what I think we still need to work on a lot. Or like I noticed myself that I hadn't been clear enough about our practices when bringing students to mainstream classes, and then I faced negative reactions—why does this student have special accommodations?" (V1)

"...the conflicts between different working cultures within the school. That's the most exhausting part of the job." (V3)

"I have to defend myself if I do things differently or if I don't strictly follow the textbook." (V3)

"And it bothers me a bit that this isn't actually the school's or the city's official approach, so nobody knows how great what we're doing here really is." (V5)

"When you spend the day supporting students, it can be quite draining. Really draining. You're supporting kids with major challenges, and when you get home, you definitely feel like you've done a full day's work." (V1)

While most special education teachers reported positive work engagement and motivation to seek and prepare learning materials, some also found this process laborious and somewhat taxing. Although there is a fairly abundant selection of strength-based learning materials available, finding the most suitable approaches takes time. Sometimes suitable materials aren't readily available, requiring teachers to create their own. The interviews also highlighted a lack of materials in simplified Finnish or plain language, while simultaneously noting their importance.

"...it would be great to have things in plain language so they could understand what they're responding to, and to explain things in a way that's comprehensible." (V2)

"It can be challenging at times to limit your own curiosity and time investment." (V3)

"I don't find the time commitment heavy or terrible because I've always thought it's my own choice— nobody's forcing me to work overtime." (V3)

Primarily, the use of strength-based pedagogy was seen as a tool where the effort invested appeared as positive exertion. While increasing awareness of strengths was viewed positively, acquiring new knowledge and understanding could challenge one's capacity to internalize new concepts.

"...increasing understanding is really challenging for me—increasing that positive understanding, meaning those specific methods." (V1)

"...it challenges you, constantly challenges you to reflect. You can't do it by routine." (V3)

Time pressure and feelings of inadequacy also emerged in the participants' responses. The school's operational culture often involves a constant sense of urgency, with situations changing rapidly. Special education teachers reported that due to time constraints, it could sometimes be challenging to allocate sufficient time to listen to students.

Additionally, students' diverse needs and temperaments could lead to feelings of inadequacy. Learning to balance time and attention among all those who need it was identified as an ongoing challenge.

"Time pressure—that's the real devil in schools. You should always have time to talk with students, take them aside, and make sure they feel heard about their issues, but the schedule is the worst monster." (V4)

"...occasionally that feeling of inadequacy—am I giving everyone equal attention, because some require more than others." (V7)

Overall, the interviewed special education teachers reported surprisingly few sources of stress when using strength-based pedagogy. They might initially respond that nothing particularly burdens them. However, upon reflection, they began identifying factors that create friction or frustration in their chosen pedagogical approach. The greatest frustrations related to the diversity of working cultures among staff, where the interviewed special education teacher might be the sole practitioner of strength-based pedagogy in their school. In such cases, collegial support was lacking, and differing approaches among teachers could confuse students—particularly in situations where students were integrated into other teaching groups.

7. Discussion
Teacher well-being and strengths represent an extremely important and socially significant topic. While this article focuses on special education teachers' experiences, we cautiously suggest that the research findings may also apply to the broader teaching profession. The discussion about the well-being and resilience of children, youth, and teachers has been increasingly prominent in media for some time now. Teacher exhaustion and workload pressures are particularly concerning given the growing number of children and adolescents experiencing declining well-being.

This study's results reinforce the understanding that good begets good. Strength-based approaches emerged as a working method that enhances well-being for both students and teachers. The special education teachers' comments clearly revealed their personal commitment to implementing strength-based pedagogy. Participants reported having more tools and capabilities to handle even the most challenging situations they inevitably encounter in their work. Notably, these difficult situations weren't framed negatively - they were viewed as challenges that could be overcome through strengths and positive thinking, which actually increased work motivation.

Although nearly all participants had voluntarily adopted strength-based pedagogy as their professional approach, they still felt the need to share their experiences with others. The teachers expressed hope that colleagues would notice the successes achieved through regularly highlighting, teaching, and utilizing strengths in the classroom. They actively sought to showcase these successes in conversations with other school staff. A shared pedagogical approach would also reduce potential conflicts arising from different working methods within school communities. Only one of the eight participants had clear principal support, with strength-based pedagogy being an established cultural practice in their school. Others reported positive interest from colleagues, but noted it hadn't yet become a unified school-wide approach. While adopting new pedagogical methods may cause conflicting feelings and even increase stress, this wasn't perceived as burdening work motivation - rather as an important focus area worth developing for both student and teacher well-being.

Despite the positive resonance of strength-based approaches and scientific evidence of their benefits, cultural change processes in schools progress slowly. Finnish schools' emphasis on teacher autonomy presents both opportunities and challenges for implementing shared strength-based approaches. Teaching strengths loses its foundation if educators view it merely as an obligation. This study's participants emphasized that feedback about strengths must be genuine, situation-appropriate, and well-timed - indicating that teachers must personally believe in this pedagogy and its benefits.

If strength-based pedagogy were to expand across basic education and secondary levels, it would need careful planning to become a functional, structural part of school life. All participants in this study taught in elementary schools, leaving upper secondary perspectives unrepresented in this research.

Human diversity has been openly discussed in current dialogues, regardless of whether society is fully ready to accept it and implement well-being enhancing methods for both students and teachers. What remains undeniable is that every individual

holds value and deserves the opportunity to recognize their own worth.

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