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“The Best Thing Was to Realize that I Am Not a Nobody. I Am Meaningful.” Students’ Perceptions of a Strengths-Based Approach to Guidance

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“The Best Thing Was to Realize that I Am Not a Nobody. I Am Meaningful.” Students’ Perceptions of a Strengths-Based Approach to Guidance

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Abstract

This article reports findings from a study among 9th-graders who participated in a strengths-based intervention in two West-Finnish comprehensive schools. The intervention pursued to develop the students’ psychological capital (PsyCap), awareness of their strengths, and experiences of student guidance. The following research question was set for this study: How do students perceive the change in themselves during a strengths-based intervention? This research used the phenomenographic approach. The students were chosen from the original group of students participating in the intervention so that those who showed highest increase in PowerZone during the initial and end measures of the intervention were invited to interviews. Altogether six girls and four boys were interviewed personally. The results showed how strengths boosted students’ optimism evincing changes in perceptions of one’s own strengths; changes in attitudes toward schoolwork; and changes in attitudes toward the future. This research contributed to the discussion a very important viewpoint, namely that of the young people themselves. Their experiences should be at the core and considered carefully when developing new methods and tools for student guidance and counseling.

Keywords: positive psychology; human strengths; strengths-based guidance; positive psychological capital (PsyCap); phenomenographic research

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“Lo Mejor Fue Darme Cuenta de que No Soy Nadie. Soy Significativo”. Percepciones del Alumnado sobre un Enfoque de Orientación Basado en las Fortalezas.

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Resumen

Este artículo informa los hallazgos de un estudio entre estudiantes de noveno grado que participaron en una intervención basada en fortalezas en dos escuelas integrales de Finlandia occidental. La intervención persiguió desarrollar el capital psicológico de los estudiantes (PsyCap), la conciencia de sus fortalezas y experiencias de orientación estudiantil. Para este estudio se planteó la siguiente pregunta de investigación: ¿Cómo perciben los estudiantes el cambio en sí mismos durante una intervención basada en fortalezas? Esta investigación utilizó el enfoque fenomenográfico. Los estudiantes se eligieron del grupo original de estudiantes que participaron en la intervención para que aquellos que mostraron el mayor aumento en PowerZone durante las medidas iniciales y finales de la intervención fueran invitados a las entrevistas. En total, seis niñas y cuatro niños fueron entrevistados personalmente. Los resultados mostraron cómo las fortalezas impulsaron el optimismo de los estudiantes evidenciando cambios en las percepciones de las propias fortalezas; cambios en las actitudes hacia el trabajo escolar; y cambios en las actitudes hacia el futuro. Esta investigación aportó a la discusión un punto de vista muy importante, a saber, el de los propios jóvenes. Sus experiencias deben estar en el centro y considerarse cuidadosamente al desarrollar nuevos métodos y herramientas para la orientación y el asesoramiento de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: psicología positiva; fortalezas humanas; orientación basada en fortalezas; capital psicológico positivo (PsyCap); investigación fenomenográfica

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The purpose of student guidance in basic education is to support the adolescents' belief in their future and opportunities (Sinkkonen et al., 2017). To achieve this goal, guidance should pay attention to students' strengths awareness and boost their positive self-conception, support their success at school and motivation to study (Linley et al., 2010; Wood et al., 2011). The benefits of recognizing one's strengths have long been identified but still, practical processes, strategies, and activities need to be developed and tested among the students (Galloway et al., 2020).

Interventions among students have focused on strengths awareness and PsyCap also earlier but those interventions that also have covered an analysis on student perceptions with a qualitative approach are scarce (Chatzinikolaou, 2015). More often than not, the interventions are only measured for numeric data to prove the efficiency of intervention. The ways how adolescents themselves feel or experience the intervention have not been reported systematically. An exception is, for example, Galloway et al.'s (2020) study titled "Strengths-based teaching and learning approaches for children: Perceptions and practices" that included also students', teachers', and parents' experiences of recognizing and developing strengths through a semi-structured questionnaire and group interviews. In Leskisenoja's (2016) strengths-based intervention, she studied perceptions of joy at school also with a survey and interviews among students alongside beginning and end measurements (see also Leskisenoja & Uusiautti, 2017). In sum, strengths-based interventions enhance well-being but how those who are targets of these interventions perceived the intervention and changes in the perceptions of themselves should be investigated further (Chatzinikolaou, 2015).

In this article, we report findings from a study among 9th-graders who participated in a strengths-based intervention in two West-Finnish comprehensive schools. The 9th grade in the Finnish school system is the last grade of comprehensive school. The intervention pursued to develop the students' psychological capital (PsyCap), awareness of their strengths, and experiences of student guidance (Katajisto et al., 2021). The PowerZone tool was used in guidance. The tool was developed based on a wide conception of strengths including character strengths, abilities, interests, values, and resources (Biswas-Diener 2011; Mayerson, 2015; Niemiec, 2018; Wood et al.,

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2011). The intervention was constructed so that the first six lessons introduced each part of the wide conception of strengths at a time (character strengths, interests, talents, values, resources, and skills). During the lessons, students familiarized with their own strengths and those of their peers by using a variety of tools (strengths tests, group practices, etc., see also Katajisto et al., 2021). The last two lessons focused on rehearsing and thinking back at what was learned. In addition, each student received a one-hour-long personal guidance session. In the session, the students built their own power zone including all six parts of strengths included in the power zone too. They also had a strengths discussion with the student counsellor.

Students in the control group (n=46) did not receive strengths-based guidance. Both groups were measured before and after the intervention and the findings showed that the PowerZone guidance had positive impacts to students (Katajisto et al., 2021). In this article, we focus on the student experiences of the intervention by focusing on those students whose PowerZone scores increased the most during the intervention. The phenomenographic approach was used here to elicit their perceptions and analyze how they perceived the meaning and effect of the intervention (Huusko & Paloniemi, 2006; Marton, 1988; Marton & Booth, 1997; Marton & Pong, 2005; Niikko, 2003).

Theoretical Background

As mentioned, this research was based on the wide conception of strengths according to which all strengths—whether they were physical, psychological, or social—enhance human flourishing and self-esteem (Wenström, 2020a; Wenström, 2020b; Wood et al., 2011). In addition, the perspective supports the idea of approaching various strengths simultaneously and in interaction with each other (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). Thus, this conception serves as a framework for a strengths-based (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011; Niemiec, 2018; Linley & Harrington, 2006). The strengths-based intervention in this research followed Mayerson's (2015) definition of a power zone that formed the Finnish translation for the strengths-based tool (Voimakehä® [Power Zone], Wenström, 2020b). It provided a model, structure, and method for strengths-based guidance and coaching.

When one has an opportunity to employ various strengths at the same time, the person acts in his or her power zone that is the optimal point for flourishing and well-being (Mayerson, 2015; Niemiec, 2018).

Strengths-based interventions aim at change. The change may occur in many ways but the purpose is to achieve a permanent and future-oriented change in the minds of those people participating interventions (e.g., Proyer et al., 2015). Seligman (2011) describes this change as a conscious learning process when the person's mind is taught how to perceive himself or herself or his or her environment, or how they explain certain life events (De Vries et al., 2021). The thought patterns, our habitual ways of explaining events are not, however, easily changeable (Manka et al., 2014). Therefore, when trying to understand the young person's perceptions, it is important to be aware of how people tend to approach changes or think about themselves.

One interesting perspective is provided by Carol Dweck (2006, 2010) who distinguish two types of mindsets: growth mindset and fixed mindset. Those students with a growth mindset think that even though they differ from each other in their talents, interests, or temperament, they can improve themselves with persistence, trying, and new learning strategies. They are ready to accept challenges and do not worry about failures but perceive those as a part of the learning process (Dweck, 2012). Feedback is seen valuable to learning and others' successes inspire them (Dweck, 2006; Blackwell et al., 2007; Esparza et al., 2014; Smiley et al., 2016).

Furthermore, those with the growth mindset recognize their strengths and weaknesses better than those with the fixed mindset (Dweck, 2006). Thus, the growth mindset provides students with good chances to cope with hardships and difficult situations (Uusitalo-Malmivaara & Vuorinen, 2016).

The students with a fixed mindset believe that intelligence is an inherited characteristic. They also tend to have lower motivation to study and perform poorer at school than their peers with a growth mindset (Blackwell et al., 2007; Dweck, 2006). Usually, students with fixed mindset want to show their intelligence with easy tasks, by avoiding challenges or giving up when facing challenges (Farrington, 2013; Smiley et al., 2016). These students perceive other's success as a threat and feedback irrelevant for their learning (Dweck, 2012; Saunders, 2013).

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Research shows that students' mindsets develop and change during their lives (see e.g., Flanigan et al., 2017; Gunderson et al., 2017). If teachers imply that success is based on only intelligence as a born quality, they strengthen the fixed attitudes: they do not encourage development and opportunities to become something (Dweck, 2006). On the other hand, if teachers emphasize trying and invest in the learning process instead of fixed abilities, success appears as the outcome of one's own doing and behaviors, which refers to the growth mindset (Dweck, 1999; Kamins & Dweck, 1999). This can increase students' passion for learning and improve their academic skills and behaviors (Dweck, 2006, 2010; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Blackwell et al., 2007; Yeager et al., 2016). This approach challenges the teachers as well to notice all students with their various abilities and encourage them to grow (Miao, 2021).

For example, in Tang et al.'s (2021) study, students learned to see the connection between the challenges they had encountered and their effort and successes. This also refers to the concept of learned optimism (Seligman, 1991), that students learn to believe that they can conquer challenges and achieve what they want to achieve. From the perspective of positive change and growth, the students learned to recognize their abilities and strengths as features they can develop and understood that in order to achieve their goals, they have to make the effort (Dweck, 2010) and be persistent (Duckworth et al., 2007).

Method

The following research question was set for this study: How do students perceive the change in themselves during a strengths-based intervention?

This research used the phenomenographic approach which was considered to suit the best to the research of students' perceptions (Huusko & Paloniemi, 2006; Niikko, 2003; Marton, 1988; Marton & Booth, 1997). The purpose was to describe the variation and change in perceptions within the special group of students chosen for this study (Limberg, 2008; Marton, 1988; Sin, 2010; Uljens, 1989), which was the ninth-graders who participated in a strengths-based intervention. By focusing on their perceptions, the research in question will provide information about what kind of meaning the students gave to the intervention.

The test group of ninth-graders consisted of 70 students (36 girls and 34 boys, aged 15) comprised three parallel groups: 9A, 9B, and 9C. The 9A was an inclusive group of 27 students, taught by a subject teacher and a special education teacher. Groups 9B (22 students) and 9C (21 students) were general education groups. Of these, ten students were personally interviewed for this research (Appendix 1). These ten students were chosen from the original group of students participating in the intervention and expressing their willingness to take part in interviews (n=43) so that those who showed highest increase in PowerZone during the initial and end measures of the intervention were invited to interviews. Thus, the group of students interviewed represented both students who started with low scores compared to then mean value of their own grade but showed increase toward the end of intervention as well as those who had relatively high scores compared to then mean value of their own grade in the beginning but also showed increase at the end of intervention. Six girls and four boys represented somewhat evenly also groups 9A-C (two girls and two boys from 9A; one girl and one boy from 9B; and three girls and one boy from 9C). The results section includes excerpts from the student interviews. The students were coded with numbers and referred as Student1, Student2, etc. The interviews were conducted in the Finnish language and the excerpts were translated into English by the authors of this article.

The interview followed a semi-structured format which allowed flexible discussion with each student focusing on their own experiences and perceptions. The interview guide consisted of four themes that were (1) PsyCap, (2) wide conception of strengths, (3) future career plans based on the student guidance, and (4) general experiences about the PowerZone tool. The students were, for example, asked to describe why in their opinion the ability to adjust to changes improved during the intervention (PsyCap), how the guidance impacted the ability to recognize their strengths (wide conception of strengths), how their career plans changed during the intervention (future career plans based on the student guidance), and how useful the guidance had been (general experiences).

In addition, the high increase between initial and end measurements during the intervention were discussed with students charting for reasons they considered significant for the positive change in numbers.

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The interviews were carried out in March 2021. To make the interview situation easy to the students, they were given an A5-sized card that included the questions. This has been noticed a good way of helping young interviewees to focus on the intervention and follow the progress of interview situation (Äärelä, 2012).

The phenomenographic analysis was data-based as the purpose was to identify the range of meanings and meaningful units from the students' descriptions (Huusko & Paloniemi, 2006; Marton & Pong, 2005). The analysis of this research data followed the so-called four-level model which consists of meaning units (level I), sub-categories (level II), result categories (level III), and main categories (level IV). After the interview data was transcribed, the analysis started by identifying meaningful expressions from the students' answers. The expressions were sentences or sections that included a relevant or interesting thought related to the research question.

After this work, the original expressions were categorized into meaningful units (Niikko, 2003). The following is an example of how the meaning units were discovered:

Original expression: "When I found out that I really am good at something, I started to gain self-confidence and now I have been more willing to persevere."
(Student7) - Meaning units: Recognition of strengths, Self-confidence

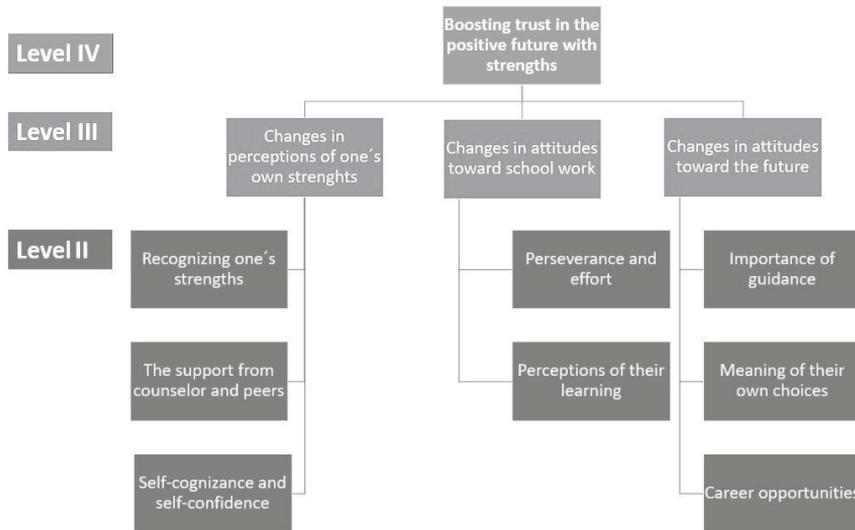
When the meaning units were discovered, the analysis proceeded to level II. At this level, the purpose was to combine all units into various categories that were called sub-categories. Each category provided a special perspective to the students' experience (see also Harris, 2011). At this point, categories did not present any individual student's perceptions but various perceptions of certain topics. For example, meaning units of "Recognizing strengths", "Self-confidence", and "Self-esteem" were categorized into the sub-category of "Self-cognizance and self-confidence".

The third level of analysis combined sub-categories into result categories that introduce the main findings from the data. This phase included a few rounds of re-organization and analyses until the results could be presented in a comprehensive manner. For example, the sub-categories of "Self-cognizance and self-confidence", "Support from the counselor and peers", and

“Recognition of strengths” formed the result category of “Changes in perceptions about one’s own strengths”.

At the level IV, result categories were viewed in the light of the theoretical framework. Thus, the result categories were combined into the main category of “Boosting trust in the positive future with strengths”. The whole categorization is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
The categorization of findings



In research like the one reported here shows that the child is an active and capable subject (Bucknall, 2014; Fattore et al., 2012; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013). Examination of ethics plays a key role in all phases of research (see e.g., Keskitalo et al., 2012; Kvale, 1996). However, the significance of this is particularly emphasized when researching children (see e.g., Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013). The chosen methods and techniques must make the child's voice heard best (Peltokorpi et al., 2013), without causing them any harm. Ethical issues were an integral, natural part of this study at every stage from research design, implementation, and final reporting.

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One ethical issue in child research is to make sure that participation in research is voluntary (see e.g., Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013) and participants can withdraw at any time from the research. In Finland, guardians of children under the age of 15 decide about the child's participation in research (Kohonen et al., 2019). Permission for interviews were obtained from the municipal education administration, the guardians, and students themselves (Greig et al., 2013; Masson, 2005). The guardians and students were informed about the contents of research and the opportunity to withdraw from the research at any time. All data were handled anonymously. No personal information as defined in the 4th article of EU 2016/679 was collected.

Results

As shown in Figure 1, the main category of the findings includes students' perceptions of how strengths awareness provided future-orientation and belief in one's opportunities in career and life in general. Next, the results are described according to the categorization of result categories that were Perceptions of one's own strengths; Perceptions of attitudes toward school work; and Perceptions of attitudes toward the future.

Perceptions of One's Own Strengths

Perceptions of one's own strengths were categorized into three sub-categories. Recognizing one's strengths formed the first category which was evident in all students' perceptions. They described how the strengths-based guidance helped them identify their strengths and abilities, and perceive that they are good at many things. They discovered such strengths in themselves that they had not noticed or even thought about before. Guidance had revealed to students how strengths support their well-being.

“Now I know some strengths that I didn't know earlier that I would possess those.” (Student2)

“When we filled those papers, I noticed that I have quite a lot of skills.” (Student7)

“It helped me to understand what those strengths mean and what they are. And that how they impact me and so on.” (Student8)

The students had perceived that the strengths-based guidance gave them a new vocabulary about strengths and they could describe their abilities and strengths better after the intervention. Some of them had discussed strengths also with their family and friends, which showed how their awareness had increased during the intervention.

“If I have to tell about myself for example in an interview, I can at least tell what kind of strengths I have.” (Student9)

“We have talked about it with friends sometimes. They tell about their strengths and I tell mine. I am like Tigger, funny and never still.” (Student3)

The second sub-category included perceptions of changes in self-cognizance and self-confidence. The students described that when they had learned about their strengths it had a positive impact. They either found out that they have positive characteristics in themselves or they received confirmation to their earlier thoughts about themselves. Therefore, for those who already recognized some of their strengths before the intervention, the guidance confirmed their awareness. In addition, the students had noticed that they were now more confident to try new things than before, without any pre-conception of how to handle the new task or situation.

“When the PowerZone tool showed me strengths, it gave me a little bit more self-confidence.” (Student5)

“You learn to know your own strengths and your values, what you have. And you learn about yourself and how you can use your skills.” (Student2)

“Now I know about these strengths, so that probably does it that I can try all things with more confidence even if I don’t know if I can do it.” (Student9)

A good example of the change is the case of Student4. At the beginning of the 9th grade, she thought that she was not good at anything. She got poor grades and was not motivated. During the strengths-based guidance intervention, she gained confidence and her self-image improved. Her description shows how she seemed to develop toward the growth mindset (Dweck, 2006):

“It shows you that if you, right now, think that you can’t do anything and such, but along with this PowerZone you figure that you can and that you are able to

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do things. And that you are this and that, something that you have never thought about. So, now you get to know what you really are. So, in my opinion, it shows you really well yourself.” (Student4)

The third sub-category included students’ perceptions of the support from counselor and peers. All students considered personal guidance the best part of the intervention. They filled their personal PowerZone cards and discussed the findings together with the counselor. The counselor explained what the strengths mean, how they are interconnected, and provided feedback about the student’s strengths. The purpose was also to strengthen the student’s self-confidence alongside awareness of strengths (see also [Biswas-Diener et al., 2011](#); [Proctor et al., 2009](#); [Salmela, 2016](#)).

“And it wasn’t just that I would choose the strengths and that’s it. But it was explained and discussed what it meant and told how the strengths describe me.” (Student3)

“When the teacher said that it is really great that you have this kind of social skills that not many have these days, I felt really good. I have something that not many persons do, but I do, and that’s so great. I really felt like ‘yes!’.” (Student4)

In the pair and group meetings, the students described their own strengths and provided feedback to each other with the PowerZone cards. The perceptions varied to some extent. According to the students’ perceptions, hearing about their strengths from their peers felt good and encouraging. These kinds of positive experiences were mainstreaming.

“When your peer gave you the card and said ‘you are like this’, it felt nice.” (Student5)

“We took our own cards and then we told about them to others and explained why we are like we are. And then we just changed the cards and thought that hey, you are like this and then we could give the card to someone else. We were in good contact with each other.” (Student 4)

However, some students had perceived these group discussions challenging. The reasons were that some students did not do the tasks properly or the restless behavior disturbed concentration. In addition, some found it difficult to talk about strengths openly with peers.

“When you had to change the cards, some students showed that they were not interested at all. So, they didn’t do it.” (Student8)

“There were so many people doing it at the same time - - so I couldn’t think properly which strengths suits who.” (Student9)

Even though the students’ perceptions of the role of peers in developing with strengths awareness, the way they brought up others’ roles reveal that at its best, peers can provide a significant positive boost in self-confidence and learning about one’s strengths. The findings also show that more attention to the ways of implementing group tasks should be paid in strengths-based counselling, as it seemed important to provide a peaceful setting to peer discussion and to support active participation.

Perceptions of Attitudes toward School Work

The first sub-category in this results category was perseverance and effort. The students had perceived that they had started to do more school work, did more tasks, and were more attentive in classes. They also described that they wanted to read more to exams and get better grades, even though schoolwork was not any nicer after the intervention. However, they pointed out that after increased knowledge about their strengths and self-confidence, they found it more meaningful to work hard. They also had understood in a new way the importance of the ninth-grade (which is the last grade before secondary school in Finland) to their future. They reported that they had perceived their goals in a new way and felt more confident to work toward those goals (see also [Bandura, 1994](#)).

A good example of the previous change occurred in Girl8 who told how she tried to take her ADHD medicine on a regular basis in order to keep focused on studying—she had ignored her medicine for six months and her scores had started to decrease. The guidance had given her reason to re-think her study success and now she wanted to keep up a healthy daily rhythm. Others reported similar perceptions:

“I have been striving to have my scores go up.” (Student6)

“When I found out that I really am good at something, I started to gain more self-confidence and now I have been able to try harder.” (Student4)

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The positive cycle included also students' perceptions of their learning. Their increased effort seemingly provided them with more successes in exams and during lessons, which boosted their belief in learning. With greater knowledge about their strengths, they also gained understanding about their learning styles and could ask for help and guidance to achieve their goals. Indeed, success at school among adolescents has been noted to be connected with high self-esteem—on the other hand, it is possible that self-esteem leads to better performances at school (Baumeister et al., 2003).

“For example, in PE lessons, I just think that I will do my best and try, so I will eventually learn.” (Student9)

“You have to move on from where you are. For instance, if you get a bad score from an exam, you will have the chance to improve in the next one, of course.” (Student5)

“I told my grade's own teacher which style of studying is easier to me and I understand things more easily. After that this has progressed so that now I probably get more help with the things I need help.” (Student4)

The students' perceptions of themselves as learners and students had changed positively in a way that they understood better their own abilities and specific traits as students but also the meaning of perseverance and effort (see also Dweck, 1986; Kamins & Dweck, 1999). The latter is difficult to understand or even become motivated if the student does not have a clue of what they are good at or the meaning of their own learning profile. The strengths-based guidance had revealed positive aspects of themselves and thus, according to the students' own descriptions, had changed their attitudes to school into a more positive direction.

Perceptions of Attitudes toward the Future

The first sub-category in this result category includes the students' perceptions of the importance of guidance. The combination of the traditional student counseling and the strengths-based guidance was functional. Namely, alongside with familiarization with one's strengths, students also learned about various professions and abilities and strengths needed in them. This

information helped them decide where to continue studies after the ninth-grade.

“They explain what for example people do in different professions. So you can find out whether it is a match with your own qualities.” (Student 8)

“Exactly, it helped me to decide where I would like to apply [after the ninth grade]. It gave me more confidence.” (Student3)

Furthermore, the students had perceived the meaning of their own choices. The students described their abilities to make reasonable choices and the significance of their own effort for the future. They explained that if they want to reach their goals, they have to persevere. More important was, however, to notice that the students actually described optimistic attitudes and ability to look at the future from their strengths’ perspective and become more honest and straightforward about their personal characteristics.

“When I started to talk about my businesses and emotions, those fears vanished when everyone showed so much compassion to me. - - I have started to be more open with my loved ones and it has helped a lot to progress. Things do not stay inside my head anymore but when I get those out, it helps me.” (Student4)

“If you want something, you have to do something too. You just have to study, and so you will reach your goals. At least, you have to do something to reach the goals.” (Student7)

Furthermore, the students described how they were more confident in their abilities to find optional ways of coping with changes or adversities. Even in times of major changes in their lives they could do their own choices and find positive solutions.

“For example, moving. At the moment, I think a lot about this. All my friends will stay here and my dad. But then again, I can come to meet them every holiday and so on. So, there is nothing bad in this.” (Student8)

The third sub-category includes students’ perceptions of their career opportunities. The students reported that their effort with grades increased their belief in future by opening more opportunities to secondary studies and better employment opportunities.

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However, everyone did not share this perception. Some students described that they had made their career decisions already earlier, before the intervention. Some students, on the other hand, compared their strengths with their dream occupations, and thus got confirmation about the direction they wanted to go after the ninth grade. The strengths-based guidance had also helped students to discover new career opportunities if their first choice would not realize also in the case when students did not have any career plans or ideas of a suitable profession.

“It confirmed my thoughts. Those papers showed that I have the kinds of characteristics that one needs in high school and police academy. Physical educators training would be suitable if the police academy was not an option.” (Student7)

“I wasn’t sure at first whether I should choose high school or vocational school. But in the guidance, I was thinking that what I am good at really. Then I decided that the vocational school would be it and the confectioner education would be good.” (Student8)

“The PowerZone tool showed me that all my strengths were connected with my social nature, and I didn’t know beforehand that it would be such a strong strength. This [knowledge] had such an impact that I would like to do something that is about other people. I won’t be able to do an office job, for one. I surely want to do something that involves other people.” (Student9)

The students’ perceptions in general showed that they felt more optimistic about their future opportunities than before the intervention. They also had more tools to analyze their dreams in the light of their strengths and understood the importance of making choices that honor their strengths and abilities.

Discussion

The strengths-based approach helped students to recognize their strengths and notice that they are good at many things. The findings correspond with research by [Hotulainen et al. \(2015\)](#), [Leskisenoja \(2016\)](#), [Quinlan et al. \(2011\)](#), and [Quinlan et al. \(2014\)](#). Based on the students’ own perceptions, it increased their self-esteem and encouraged them to try new things, to be more optimistic about their opportunities and future in general (see also [Govindji &](#)

Linley, 2008; Leskisenoja & Sandberg, 2019). The students described that during the intervention their increased awareness of their strengths had also encouraged them to invest more in schoolwork. Although the ninth-grade is usually the grade when students try to improve their scores, the manner in which they talked about the role of the strengths-based guidance revealed that they had a more profound idea about the meaning of strengths and how to use them to achieve aspired things in their lives. In addition, those students, who had not been interested in their scores much, had found new sources for motivation from their strengths-awareness and increased self-esteem. Although the strengths-based guidance cannot be considered an answer to students' all problems, it provided some positive answers and ways of reflecting themselves and their opportunities. At its best, a positive chain could emerge that boosted the students' optimism and trust in their future. The findings from research can be viewed from the thematic viewpoints of PsyCap, strengths and resources, and student guidance (Table 1).

Table 1

The core findings of this research from a thematic perspective

Theme	Students' perceptions
PsyCap	Recognizing their own strengths increased the students' self-confidence, optimistic attitudes, and belief in future.
Strengths and resources	The intervention helped the students to recognize their own and others' strengths and understand the meaning of strengths for their own well-being.
Student guidance	The intervention changed the students' attitudes toward studies positively and increased their education and career choices.

Limitations

The findings in this research are based on intervention research during which the students were interviewed personally about their experiences. The interview data was obtained to gain further understanding about how the students' perceptions of themselves changed during the strengths-based guidance applied in the intervention. The interest was in those students

especially who had benefitted the most from the intervention based on the results in beginning and end measurements. While this provided us an objective way of selecting students in this interview research, it simultaneously left some experiences and perceptions out from the research. How would have those students described the intervention who did not show much increase in their PsyCap or strengths? The choice made is was deliberate and founded on the original positive psychological perspective of what we can learn from those who show high levels of well-being and flourishing (Myers & Diener, 1995; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). We are aware that other choices would probably have provided us different views to the intervention. However, the interview data revealed comprehensively the variety of experiences among students, also the critical ones, and it seemed to provide an adequate picture of student experiences.

Secondly, the findings cannot be generalized due to the low number of participants. This is not the goal in a phenomenographic research in the first place. For the goal of being able to describe the intervention experiences and perceptions of the increase in strengths awareness, the method appeared suitable and students' voices were reached well (Sin, 2010).

Conclusion

This research contributed to the discussion a very important viewpoint, namely that of the young people themselves. Their experiences should be at the core and considered carefully when developing new methods and tools for student guidance. The students interviewed in this research reported that being aware of their strengths gave them confidence to choose their next study place and think about their future career opportunities and life goals in general (see also Linley et al., 2010). This finding differs to some extent from Lappalainen et al.'s (2020) study in which the Finnish adolescents felt that they had not been guided to recognize their strengths or suitable professions for them. This left them without information that would be crucial when making the decision. Finding the right path was merely about trial and error. This research seemed to provide one answer to this need. This is important because it is about a decision about one's profession, which should be based on profound self-cognizance and ability to assess which study programs and occupations are

interesting and suitable and match with one's skills and strengths (see also Sinkkonen et al., 2017).

The study revealed many positive outcomes of a strengths-based intervention as described by students themselves. Their mindsets seemed to change toward the growth mindset as described by Dweck (2006). According to research (Chen et al., 2019; Samuel & Warner, 2021; Dixon, 2020), this mindset supports PsyCap and its elements. Although this change cannot be showed with the interview data per se, it was important to learn how students' perceptions involved items that show changes in their self-perceptions and attitudes toward school and future. Chatzinikolaou's (2015) findings support our interpretations: in her intervention, students' self-esteem increased and so did their attitudes to schoolwork and strengths awareness increase. In Chatzinikolaou's study, students reported that they had also become more social and honest after the intervention, which appeared in the data of our research as well.

The fast changes and crises surrounding education and schools also inevitably impact students' development and well-being and their needs for life-long guidance. Strengths serve as resources at the times of hardships or adversities as they support optimism, self-confidence, and the ability to make self-appreciative choices (Park & Peterson, 2006; Niemiec & McGrath, 2019). Unquestionably, the value of strengths-based interventions lies also in the way they support optimism and positive future orientation in the participants (see e.g., Feldman & Dreher, 2012; Hyvärinen et al., 2022). Eventually, for happy and successful life, optimism seems to be the key predictor that overrules for example the traditional intelligence or IQ (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005).

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