

TEACHERS' ROLE ON SOCIAL INCLUSION AND EMPLOYABILITY PROSPECTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Michalis Varkas

Headmaster – Psychologist, EEEEEK Lesvos, GREECE, mixvarkas@hotmail.com

Abstract

Social inclusion and employment prospects of young students with disabilities depend not only on positive attitudes but also on appropriate vocational training. There is an urgent need to implement effective intervention strategies to alleviate barriers and facilitate successful outcomes for the employment of young people with disabilities, and at the same time there is growing evidence that helping them gain early work experiences leads to better long-term results of vocational rehabilitation. There are many social groups that can influence employment opportunities and outcomes for students with disabilities (e.g., parents, employers, employment counsellors, etc.) but teachers are of primary importance. They have at their disposal a wealth of knowledge about the advantages and needs associated with the school to employment transition of young people with disabilities, and at the same time they understand the extent to which existing school activities are effective in strengthening them. Our literature review shows that teachers' attitudes have a significant impact on job opportunities and the transition to work for students with disabilities. Negative attitudes can limit the type of education services provided and the potential for their successful training. Teachers play a predominant and essential role in removing social exclusion, initially supporting their students' stay at school and later providing immediate training to improve employment outcomes. Ultimately, they affect their employability because their attitudes have a direct impact on the structure, content, implementation and promotion of school to employment transition programs.

Keywords: Students with Disabilities, Vocational Training, Secondary Education, Teachers, Attitudes, Social Inclusion, Employability.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social protection includes actions aimed at empowering the individual, social and labour integration, the utilization of human resources, sustainable economic development and the strengthening of social cohesion. In line with the European priority for combating unemployment and removing barriers for vulnerable groups for smooth access to the labour market, strengthening of new forms of employment and entrepreneurship plays a central role. There is an urgent need to implement effective intervention strategies to alleviate barriers and facilitate successful outcomes for the employment of young people with disabilities, and at the same time there is growing evidence that helping young people to gain early work experiences leads to better long-term results of vocational rehabilitation. Especially, regarding the advantages of school curricula for students with disabilities, they are associated with increased motivation to study and get the skills that are required for success at work (Cimera et al, 2013). Better access to education services and the fight against various forms of discrimination ultimately facilitate the integration of vulnerable social groups such as people with disabilities into the labour market.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Special Education and Students with Disabilities

Special education is the combination of program adaptations, teaching, support, and creation of appropriate learning conditions, to effectively address the special educational needs of the student. It is a branch of education that is specifically designed to meet the educational needs of children with disabilities with a system of programs and services aimed at the development and utilization of their maximum potential. Special education has historically started with the efforts of charitable organizations, having mainly the character of protection and not so much of a systematic education. Initially, students with disabilities were placed in separate educational settings. However, the 1960s marked a turning point. Important changes are the definition and introduction of the disability classification. In other words, there were students who could attend regular schools and students who could benefit significantly from a special educational program and finally a category of children with very serious difficulties. Since the 1970s there have been significant changes in approaching the education of students with disabilities. Pivotal to these changes were legislations such as the US Act 94-142 / 1975, the WARNOCK Commission report in 1978, the 1983 Education Act in Great Britain and the 1984 decision of the EEC Ministers of Education on school integration. The Conference on the Education of Children with Special Needs in Salamanca, Spain, greatly influenced the direction of special education in the western world. The Salamanca Declaration, in which 92 states and 25 international organizations participated, introduced the right of every child to education as well as the possibility of joint education of students with disabilities with students of normal development.

Over time, the definition of special educational needs has been adjusted to respond to the humanitarian shift in the philosophy of education, in the direction of minimising social exclusion and a shift from the medical terms of the past to a modern approach and use of terminology. Indicatively, the terms "abnormal and delayed children" and "deviating from normal", were renamed to "people with special needs" and the term "people with special educational needs" was introduced. Students with disabilities and special educational needs are those who have significant learning and adjustment difficulties due to physical, mental, psychological, emotional, and social difficulties. They include students with mental disabilities, sensory visual impairments (blind, visually impaired), sensory hearing impairments, motor disabilities, chronic diseases, special learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, developmental disorders, mental disorders, and multiple disabilities.

2.2. Employability Prospects

Vocational training can be defined as theoretical education and practical training for the acquisition or upgrading of professional qualifications. At a European level, great emphasis is placed on the development of vocational education and training in a more general context, which affects people with disabilities. In particular, the European Agency for Development in Special Education, in its 2013 report, states that vocational education and training should target all people and particularly students with special educational needs at risk of exclusion from employment (Lee, 2010). Vocational education and training are a priority for the Council of Ministers, stating that every citizen must be equipped with the skills necessary to live and work in the ICT era and that special attention should be given to people with disabilities (Vislie, 2003).

Internationally, as the research of Carter et al. shows (2009) there is little participation of students with disabilities in the available options of secondary pre-vocational education. In 2012, the European average of participation in technical-vocational education was 50.4%. The enhancement of the quality and the effectiveness of vocational education and training can act as a compensatory or even a preventive measure and attract young people who experience social vulnerability. In general, the main objectives should be to make all trainees as educated as possible, to reduce the number of people leaving school early and to reduce support for subsidized positions in sheltered workplaces. The main goal of national policies should be to involve people with disabilities fully and equally in all sectors of society through the implementation of practical measures. Therefore, different levels of responsibility need to be developed by governments, parliaments, communities, municipalities, at regional or local level, by schools and individual teachers, to achieve specific employment policy objectives.

2.3. Teachers' Role on Employability Prospects

2.3.1. Social Exclusion of Students with Disabilities

Article 13 of the Treaty on European Community empowers the EU to legislate to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation. Directive 2000/78 / EC emphasizes the need for anti-discrimination measures, particularly occupation and employment. In this context, the European Commission has provided support to people with difficulty finding or retaining

employment and has adopted an action plan on equal opportunities for people with various degrees of disabilities leading to a sustainable and functional approach and to the elimination of social exclusion. Social exclusion does not only mean insufficient income but also exclusion from work and is evident in areas such as education, health and access to services and particularly affects social groups, which are subject to discrimination, segregation or weakening of the traditional forms of social relations. The European Union has set specific targets for implementing and promoting measures to combat poverty and social exclusion, to provide equal opportunities for access to resources, rights, goods and services, to adopt preventive policies against labour exclusion, to aid the most vulnerable population groups including people with disabilities at national, regional and local level.

The education system is characterized by difficulties that exacerbate social inequalities: lack of accessibility, the intensive pace of educational programs, and the goal of success based on results are at odds with the nature of disability (Barton, 2000). According to Boardman et al. (2003) historically the factors influencing the inclusion of people with disabilities in any form of employment are the growth of the economy, the percentage of jobseekers as well as the overall employment rate. It is a fact that employment contributes significantly to the participation of people with disabilities in social and economic life. In recent years, the role of vocational education in the vocational rehabilitation of people with disabilities has been internationally recognized, as well as the importance of implementing measures in this direction. However, the enactment of laws aimed at creating conditions of equality does not automatically ensure their implementation in practice, especially if the personnel responsible for the implementation of the relevant policies have negative attitudes and perceptions (Barton and Smith, 1989).

2.3.2. Teachers' Attitudes

Teachers are the most important factor for the successful implementation of educational policy. Numerous studies highlight the importance of their attitudes towards the potential of students with disabilities for the successful implementation of education, training, transition and employment programs (Clarebout et al., 2001; Jordan et al, 2009). The results of the research of Schmelkin and Berkell (1989) and Brown, Berkell and Schmelkin (1992) emphasize the importance of teachers' positive attitudes towards supported employment programs for students with disabilities and how they can contribute to their implementation and reinforcement. The importance of attitudes for designing appropriate training programs focused on increasing the likelihood of employment through internships in real workplaces is emphasized by Everson and Moon (1987). The research of Benz and Halpern (2000) emphasizes the role of secondary special education teachers as a vital factor in the success of training programs aimed at transition to work. Black and Meyer (1992) report that the attitudes of special education teachers towards the vocational training of students with severe mental disability are positive and encouraging with a view to future employment.

Teachers' attitudes towards people with disabilities significantly influence their behaviour within the school context and the efforts they make for education and training. According to Lagomarcino and Rusch (1987) the role of teachers in the success of training programs involves actions they must take so that the education content contributes to the professional rehabilitation of their students. Beliefs, prejudices and expectations of those involved in the educational process are key factors in the successful education of people with disabilities. Soresi et al. (2008) emphasize that teachers' attitudes contribute significantly to the socialization and support of people with disabilities. According to Li et al. (2009) the difficulties faced by students with disabilities in entering work are largely related to the planning by teachers of appropriate services and transition procedures. In previous research (Fabian et al., 1998) an important factor mentioned by teachers for the success of vocational training programs is the total internship time of students with disabilities. Research by Kohler et al. (1994) indicates that entering employment while studying in secondary education correlates positively with transition to work after graduation. Teachers associate vocational integration with students' communication skills and emphasize the need to strengthen them.

At the same time, other research has produced fewer positive results in relation to teachers' attitudes. In a survey by Nota and Soresi (2009) on the professional potential of people with intellectual disabilities, only a small percentage of teachers were positive about their capability to work in unprotected environments and adapt to real working conditions. Negative attitudes towards the entry of trainees into the labour market are also highlighted in the research of Soresi, et al. (2007), according to which teachers believe that students with autism cannot work in real work environments. In a study by Gilmore et al (2003) although teachers reported positively on the behaviour and personality of people with Down Syndrome, 40% of them expressed negative feelings about their ability to live independently and work.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Teachers' attitudes about the employability of students with disabilities and the skills necessary for

successful adaptation are very important, because they are the ones who provide the daily teaching, implement the curriculum, plan, and coordinate the transition services. Neutral and negative attitudes toward students with disabilities have played an important role in limiting social inclusion and access to supported employment for this vulnerable population. Wariness, doubts, bias, and prejudice on the part of teachers in relation to the abilities and capabilities of their students with disabilities can act as a self-fulfilling prophecy and lead to lower expectations and similar results. Teachers are obliged to have high expectations for all their disabled students and make more efforts to prepare them so that they meet the needs of the modern labour market. Positive attitudes of teachers towards the suitability for employment are a prerequisite for successful implementation of relevant programs. They contribute substantially to increased interest and participation, strong cooperation between members of different academic disciplines and thus facilitate effective planning and transition processes to various forms of employment. At the same time, teachers are more motivated to develop interdisciplinary programs that encourage collaboration between schools, parents, employers, and local businesses.

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