

Vocational Education for People with Disabilities in Greece: A Pre-Vocational Skills Small Scale Program

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Abstract: Vocational education and training aim to create the best possible link between education and the labor market. Through vocational education and training, individuals acquire skills, knowledge and develop their self-confidence. Particularly, people with disabilities (PWD) manage through vocational training to free themselves from marginalization and become active members of society. In our study, we first present the structures in which vocational education is provided to people with disabilities and then a vocational orientation program aimed at developing social and pre-vocational skills which was applied to students with mild intellectual disability.

Keywords: disabilities, pre-vocational skills, case study, vocational education

1. Vocational Education for People with Disabilities in Greece

One of the most important objectives of vocational education for students with disabilities is their equal social and professional development, their harmonious coexistence with society and ensuring accessibility. In Greece, the structures in which vocational education is provided to persons with disabilities are the following:

1.1. The Unified Special Vocational Schools_ Lyceums

The Unified Specialized Vocational Secondary Schools (ENEEGY-L) are part of the secondary education system and have a single administration. Students with disabilities are entitled to enroll based on a recommendation from a KEDASY. They comprise 4 classes and usually aim at post-secondary education or independent-supervised work. In order to better adapt the pupils and to provide them with psychological support, in addition to teachers, ENEGY-Ls are also staffed by special educational staff (psychologists, social workers, special therapists).

Graduates of the primary school of general or special education and graduates of the 1st or 2nd class of the VETCs are entitled to enroll in the Special Vocational High Schools until the age of sixteen. They are on a par with the Special Gymnasiums and a special program is followed so that their graduates can acquire both nine years of compulsory education and vocational training at the same time. At the end of the fourth grade a secondary school leaving certificate is awarded and at the end of the fifth grade a diploma with professional rights at level 2b is awarded. In the fifth grade, with the support of the school units, students carry out practical training to gain work experience and enrich their skills.

When the student completes his/her education, he/she has the right to enroll in the first class of the Special Vocational Lyceum in a related specialization that he/she was in the Vocational High School or in the second class of the Special Vocational Lyceum in a specialization of other interests. Also, following the recommendation of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Assessment of Counselling and Support (KEDASY), the student has the right to enroll in the 1st class of the general high school, in the 1st class of the special high school or in the 1st class of the EPAL (Law 3699/2008, article 8, paragraph 1c).

Graduates of the Special Vocational High Schools and graduates of the Special and General High Schools have the right to enroll in the Special Vocational High Schools. As in the evening lyceums, the course of study is four years long and the same subjects and specializations as in the VET school are applied. An appropriate individualized education program is applied for each pupil. The maximum number of students per class is (9) and the minimum is (5). According to paragraph 8 and article 8 of Law 3699/2008: 'Special vocational lyceums and special vocational schools are equal to vocational lyceums and vocational schools and provide equal professional rights to their graduates'. At the end of their studies, students are awarded a high school diploma and a diploma with professional rights at level 4. Furthermore, the graduates of ENEGY-L have the possibility of access to the Special Panhellenic Examinations foreseen for the students of EPAL (Law 4283/2014, article 12, paragraph 5).

1.2. The Special Vocational Education and Training Laboratories (VET Laboratories-EEEEK)

In Greece, the Special Vocational Education and Training Laboratories (SVETLs) were established by

Law 2817/2000 as public schools of Secondary Education that provide vocational training. They are part of secondary education and upon graduation their students are awarded a diploma equivalent to the secondary school leaving certificate and with professional rights at level 2a.

The operating program of the EEEEEKs, as defined by the ministerial decision 575235/C6/2002 in the Government Gazette 765/19-06-2002, Vol. 2, includes the operation of workshops and the teaching of general education courses (Language, Mathematics, Music, Physical Education, Social-Vocational Education, Aesthetic Education). The EEEEEKs have workshops in gardening, floriculture, plant and animal products, handicrafts, waxwork, cooking, pastry, sewing, carpentry, weaving, fur, cleaning of buildings, independent living and pre-vocational skills, etc. Depending on the degree and type of special educational needs of the pupils, the specialties of the workshops and the weekly timetable may vary.

Also, with Law 3699/2008, the number of classes of the EEEEEK was five (5) and the possibility of attending them increased from five (5) to eight (8) years. By Law 4186/2013 the possibility of practical training was added, and the duration of study was divided into six (6) classes.

EEEEK students do not have the opportunity to attend a General Lyceum (National Organization for the Certification of Qualifications & Vocational Guidance [EOPPEP], 2020). The enrolment cases are people with severe disabilities. The main objective is pre-vocational education and training, training for independent living, enhancing social skills and providing general academic skills. The course of study lasts 6 years and, following a recommendation from CEDI, primary school graduates of general or special education up to the age of 16 are eligible for enrolment. In addition to others, laboratory courses are also conducted depending on the specialties of each EEEEEK (e.g., gardening, cooking-pastry, handicrafts, plumbing, pottery) (Tsampounari, 2021). For all students there is an individualized special program depending on the difficulties they face. The minimum number of students per class is 4 and the maximum is 7.

The curriculum of the sixth grade of the EEEEEK is created according to the needs of the students and is supplemented by lessons from previous grades. More specifically, the aim of the sixth grade is to develop students' vocational skills and familiarize them with the professional environment. In VET schools, within the framework of the courses that have workshops, an internship of at least six months (two quarters) has been introduced in the last year. If it is not possible to carry out the placement in a workplace, it is carried out in the school's laboratories or with the support of the school cooperative. Also, after graduation and following a recommendation from the KEDASY, they are given the right to enroll in a Vocational Training School (VTS) for special education. The Teachers' Association, based on the teaching objectives set at the beginning of the year and the particularities of each student, decides whether the attendance of each student individually is considered sufficient or needs to be extended. The minimum number of pupils required for the operation of the VET center is five. As of the 2008-2009 school year, all VET schools have been converted into special vocational high schools.

1.3. The vocational schools of the Labor Employment Agency (OAED)

Founded in 1969, OAED is a public organization that aims to promote employment, provide insurance for the unemployed and protect maternity and family. The two training schools of the OAED aim to provide vocational training for people with disabilities and to prepare them for integration into the labor market. The Athens School for Vocational Training of Disabled Persons started its operation in the early 1990s in Galatzi. People with a disability rate of more than 50%, aged 18-55, are eligible to enroll. More specifically, students attending the school are people with visual impairment, mild mental disability, mental disability, organic deficiencies (heart, kidney, cancer, multiple sclerosis, etc.), deafness or hearing loss. For people with visual disabilities, vocational training takes place at the Lighthouse for the Blind in the Kallithea area of Athens. The school lasts for two years and trainees are assessed so that they can follow the appropriate programs for them. There is no specific number of students per class. The number of students is determined by the school management depending on the characteristics of the students, their interests, their level and the available places. The training specialties are divided into specialties for trainees from all levels of education and for high school graduates.

The Educational Centre for Vocational Training (EKEK) of Thessaloniki is located in the area of Lakkias Vasilikos and is aimed at young people and teenagers with disabilities. More specifically, young people aged 16-25 who have completed at least compulsory education are admitted. The students admitted are people with mild disabilities such as complex emotional and cognitive difficulties, mild intellectual disability, people on the autism spectrum of moderate or high functioning. It is necessary to have a certificate from a public medical and pedagogical center, KEDASY or from a disability certification center (KEPA). The permanent and finalization of the integration is carried out after a 2-month probationary period.

The courses and training provided by the school are divided into two categories in training for trainable and trainable students. The trainable category includes functional people who are able to self-service, to learn

basic school knowledge (reading, writing, mathematics) and basic social and vocational skills. In contrast, the exercisable receive training for self-service and independent living as they have cognitive disabilities and cannot meet the same skills as the trainable. The course of study for trainees lasts 4 years and 5 years for trainees.

1.4. Public Vocational Training Institutes (VET Institutes) or Schools of Higher Vocational Training

The Public Vocational Training Institutes (PTI) of special education are part of post-secondary non-formal education. The operation of special education IVET institutions started in 2014. The IVET institution of Agia Paraskevi in Attica and the one in Pylea in Thessaloniki were the first structures established in 2014. Then, in 2015, two more structures were established in Serres and Volos, but they did not operate. Students with sensory disabilities such as visual impairment, hearing impairment, deafness are entitled to enroll in special education institutions. They receive the relevant certificate from KEPA or KEDASY. For better training and adaptation of students in the structure there is a specialized staff for interpreting in sign language. Also, specialized teachers assist in the mobility of disabled people during their studies and during their internships. By Law 5082/2024, article 3, the Vocational Training Institutes (I.V.T.), public and private, are renamed Schools of Higher Vocational Training (S.A.V.T.).

The trainees of the special education ICEs can be graduates of general high school, EPAL or ENEEGY-L high schools. The training of students is divided into laboratory and theoretical training. It lasts four semesters for graduates of general and special high schools and two semesters for graduates of ENEEGY-L or EPAL of the same specialization. The laboratory and theoretical courses are followed by practical training of one semester and 960 hours. The interests, specificities and safety of the trainees are considered when creating specializations in the IETCs. The link between the specializations and the needs of the labor market also plays an important role. The following specializations for the year 2024-2025 are available at the IEK in Agia Paraskevi for people with hearing problems: 1) Beekeeping Technician 2) Horticulture and Greenery Technician 3) Culinary Art Technician - Chef 4) Information Technology Applications Technician (Multimedia/web designer-Developer/Video Games) 5) Acting Art 6) Ceramic Art 7) Aesthetics Specialist& Make-up Art 8) Hospitality Executive 8) Administration and Finance Executive. Exclusively for blind and visually impaired people: 1) Computer and call center operator, information and customer service technician (<https://saek-amea-ag-parask.att.sch.gr/>)

The following specialties are available at the SAEK Pilaia Chortiati, for the year 2024-2025.1) Computer and call center technician, information and customer service exclusively for blind and visually impaired people 2) Nutrition and Dietetics Executive 3) Acting Art 4) Physical Therapist Assistant 5) Culinary Art Technician - Cooking Chef 6) Information Technology Technician (Multimedia/web designer-Developer/Video Games) 7) Aesthetics Specialist & Beauty Specialist Make-up Artist 8) Horticulture and Greenery Technician 8) Interior Electrical Installation Technician 9) Radio Producer 10) Hairdressing Technician. Graduates of the Special Education CSEs have the same rights and career options as graduates of other CSEs in the same fields. If they pass the certification examinations of the EOPPEP, they receive a fifth level vocational diploma (<https://saek-pylaias-amea.thess.sch.gr>).

2. Education for Career Choice and the Teacher as a Teacher Consultant

As already noted, students with disabilities face unique challenges in their transition from school to the labor market. This means that it is necessary through a set of processes, services and technical opportunities to get to know themselves, the world of work and what factors shape it, to understand the relationship between education and work, to learn about studies, professions, social and economic life and generally to develop communication, decision-making and problem-solving skills, understanding their importance for their professional rehabilitation and development (Delasoudas, 2004).

In the school context, the implementation of the institution of vocational guidance aims at covering all the necessary skills and knowledge mentioned above. According to Law 1566/85 Article 37(1) "School Vocational Guidance aims at developing the personality of pupils, informing them about professional outlets, informing them about the transitional stages towards professional rehabilitation and their harmonious integration into society".

Students with special needs need, among other things, to be able to realize their true potential, their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their real interests and personal dreams, in order to be guided to the right choice of a profession. Parents also play an important role in their child's vocational rehabilitation. They can, if they wish, broaden their child's learning experiences outside school, arrange how to access the various professional environments, arrange bureaucratic procedures and prepare the students' contact with the people in charge of the workplace (Papanis, 2009).

The teacher who undertakes the Vocational Guidance course or even a Career Education program can develop a meaningful relationship with the student because of his/her daily contact with the student and frequent communication with his/her family, gain their trust and act as a counsellor, enhancing their mental health, so that they can realistically reduce their problem, gain self-confidence and enhance their perception of their personal worth (Malikiosi-Loisou, 2001).

The main counselling skills that essentially promote a communicative relationship and which the teacher-counsellor must possess are active listening, unconditional respect for the other person's personality, empathy and genuineness. These skills effectively promote the personal development of the individual, as they create those interpersonal relationships that make it easier for the individual to proceed more safely on the path of self-discovery and development.

3. Presentation of a Pre-Vocational Skills Small Scale Program

In the curricula of the EEEEEK it is stated that the most effective approach to knowledge in the field of Special Education is the discovery and experiential form of teaching, while task analysis is proposed as an appropriate method (Interdisciplinary Integrated Curriculum Framework, 2004).

Thus, in a Special Vocational Education and Training Laboratory in a small town in Northern Greece, a Career Education program was designed and implemented by the author of the article, in a class of 6 students with mild mental retardation, aged 15-17 years old. The reasons that led to the design and implementation of a Career Education program were mainly the following: a) the students were already in year 7 and had one more year to complete their studies. This meant that they would very quickly face the issue of finding a job or day-to-day employment, at a time when all of them had excellent skills in various fields and could work, even if only part-time, in a private company or in the public sector; and b) the concern of the parents of these children about their professional rehabilitation and preparing them for a smooth integration into the wider social context. Thus, the program implemented was entitled: *"Learning about the professions and looking for the one that suits me"*.

A) The objectives of the project were:

- 1) To inform the students about the characteristics of specific professions
- 2) To search for professions that one encounters in the local community
- 3) To work cooperatively to achieve a specific project
- 4) To familiarize themselves with the process of searching for information on the internet
- 5) To practice, as many as they can, the design of a questionnaire
- 6) To feel satisfied with their participation in the project
- 7) To express and communicate in any way they can (oral and written language, drawing, movement, etc.)

B) The sub-topics were: - Occupational monographs - Occupations found in the local community - Search for personal aptitudes and abilities - Gender and occupations.

C) Methodology for the implementation of the project:

- 1) Individual and group investigation
- 2) Lecture combined with question-and-answer sessions
- 3) Collage construction
- 4) Visit to various professional places (field research).

D) Activities: (all carried out in the Language lesson)

From the 3rd grade textbook for the course of School Vocational Guidance "SEP - Preparing for life", OEDB, Athens, 2000, activities were used - with modifications and simplification of vocabulary - where necessary - that concerned the following topics:

- 1) What I like most to do,
- 2) I manage well, moderately, a little,
- 3) What I am most attracted to when I choose a friend.

The students practiced writing a questionnaire and taking an oral interview. First, they interviewed the School Nurse at the school with questions that they had previously written down-we would call it a semi-structured interview-about: the criteria by which they chose to pursue their particular specialty, how difficult or easy the courses were in school, whether they were satisfied with their previous work, why they chose to work in a school, and other more personal questions. It was very useful discussion that took place, because among other things the question was raised whether the profession of a nurse is ultimately more for women or for men. The interview took place in the classroom.

The students then chose by themselves to interview the school's gymnastics teacher next, because the gymnastics class was everyone's favorite. Through this process, the students, with the help of the teacher, built professional profiles for the two professions of School Nurse and Gymnastics teacher.

Then they dealt with two professions that are found in the local community and market. The first was that of the shoemaker. The choice of this profession was influenced by the desire of three of the six mothers of the children, who, when asked, said that they would like their children, who are good at manual work, to learn about this profession. Thus, the students listened to the song by the Greek singer Kostas Hatzis, The shoemaker Minas, on youtube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIMTYEjn84U&list=PL9BD36648F1A47AF0>

The lyrics of the song were given with gaps that the students were asked to fill in, i.e. an exercise in aural processing. This was followed by a discussion about the prejudice in society about manual trades, and especially those for which one needs to learn a trade (plumber, bricklayer, etc.) rather than study at a university school.

The issue of the distinction between female and male professions was raised again and the children's ideas were recorded on the whiteboard using the brainstorming method. After discussion we concluded that the evolution of society has helped to make professions which were formerly considered purely masculine, such as taxi driver, garbage collector, plumber, etc., no longer so today, and that, after all, perhaps some professions requiring physical strength are in a sense more suitable for a man.

E) Visits:

- 1) This was followed by a visit to a shoe repair shop in our town. The visit and the children's conversation with the owner of the shop and shoe repairer was videotaped so that there was an opportunity to discuss in class what had been said in person. Again, the children interviewed this gentleman with questions they had prepared themselves. The pupils expressed their great pleasure on this visit as it was their first time out of school.
- 2) After ten days, the second visit to a mobile phone shop in the city took place in order to study in the field of a salesperson in such a shop. As all the students had a special interest in mobile phone devices, tablets and the internet, the enthusiasm was high from the beginning. Thus, they were able to observe the salesmen themselves while they worked, while the store manager gave us a tour of the place. We were led into his office and the children were interviewed first by him and then by a salesman and a saleswoman. The warm welcome of all the people working there, the good weather, the students' interest in the subject and the familiarity they had already acquired with the interview process all contributed to making this activity a great success. It should be noted that in both visits one student had the role of photographer and one of videographers, with my help, while the others held notebooks in their hands, to note down their impressions and thoughts throughout the specific activities.

4. Evaluation-Comments

We could say that the objectives of the program have been achieved to a very large extent. The children were trained and practiced in pre-vocational skills, such as writing a CV, searching for information about a profession, conducting an interview, communicating effectively with unfamiliar people in the workplace

Moreover, the children's mothers described the participation of their children in this program as very positive and helpful in terms of familiarizing them with specific professions in the local labor market and developing interpersonal communication skills, as well as developing positive self-image. However, we believe that some mothers did not understand the limitations of their children and may have had high expectations for their professional rehabilitation through this program. Their anxiety and concern about their children's future was further compounded by the social stereotypes and prejudices prevalent in a rural town.

Although in both workplaces the employees welcomed the children with kindness and cordiality, in a private discussion with the employers and when asked if they would hire a person with mild mental retardation in their company, the answer was negative. The increased supervision that such people may need during work, the responsibility for their safety and physical integrity, and the general perception that disability means inability to work are the main reasons explaining this behavior.

It is obvious that in our country several changes are needed for the pre-vocational training and professional integration of people with disabilities in the labor market. The above is evidenced by the fact that although there is an institutional framework for the integration of people with disabilities in Greece, most of these people do not work. The success of the vocational system for people with disabilities is the result of many factors and depends on the whole society, the economy, the socio-economic conditions prevailing, the culture, history as well as the value system prevailing in each city.

Finally, the state and any private initiative within the scope of existing possibilities for designing vocational rehabilitation programs for people with disabilities should take the following into account: 1) It is

essential that teachers and other staff working in special education structures receive adequate and continuous training. 2) Vocational guidance aimed at providing information on labor market demand and helping students discover their personal talents inclinations and limitations of students must precede vocational rehabilitation 3) programs should be designed to target specific disabilities or disadvantages, as people with special needs are a very diverse group.

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