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Linking education and employment for people with disabilities and special educational needs in Greece

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Abstract

This article examines the connection between the education and employment of people with disabilities and special educational needs. The investigation was carried out using the method of literature review. From the examination of the literature, it became clear that education is the main sector that can provide not only knowledge but also skills to people with disabilities and special educational needs to effectively transition to the labor market and employment. The education sector, as well as teachers, constitute a key factor that can influence the subsequent employment of people with disabilities and special educational needs. This implies that education should be enriched with the appropriate skills for people with disabilities and special educational needs to have equal opportunities with others in the labor market.

Keywords: Education; Employment; People with Disabilities; Special Educational Needs

1. Introduction

A higher level of education often leads to expanded career opportunities. This is particularly evident in professions that require specialized knowledge or formal qualifications. Empirical evidence and statistical research demonstrate a positive correlation between education level and medium-term adequate income, thus suggesting that education level generally has a measurable effect on earnings and/or earning potential (Leijen et al., 2021).

However, the importance of education - and in particular for people with individual problems such as those with disabilities and special educational needs - may be mitigated by a number of factors. In this context, the law of diminishing returns demonstrates that an excess of education without distinct professional specialization may have marginal utility. In addition, external factors such as socioeconomic background, access to opportunities and personal factors, i.e., intrinsic, motivation, have a substantial impact on outcomes. In today's rapidly changing labor market, where online education and training-based skills are on the rise, adaptability and continuous learning seem to be necessary conditions for maintaining the relevance of education and professional action (Leijen et al., 2021).

On the other hand, according to the new international classification system for disabilities, known as the International Classification of Functioning, Disability & Health (ICF) introduced by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2001, the causes of disability cannot be attributed exclusively to individual biological factors, but also to social factors. Disability, according to the ICF, is the result of interactions between medical parameters and various other external causes. These external causes are related to factors such as gender, age, social background, education, occupation, character, behavioral patterns and attitudes of the social environment toward disability (Vornholt et al., 2017).

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2. Conditions of employment integration

Despite updated laws to protect human rights, various measures to ensure diversity, the provision of numerous relevant services and additional programs to support the employment of people with disabilities, significant gaps still exist in this area (Papakonstantinou & Papadopoulos, 2020). Although the global population of people with disabilities exceeds one billion, these people are more likely to experience poverty in the 21st century, high medical needs, limited access to adequate healthcare and exclusion from educational opportunities.

People with disabilities encounter multiple obstacles to employment. They are usually the first to lose their jobs during a possible recession and the last to work during periods of economic expansion (Kruse & Schur, 2003). Especially in Greece and Cyprus, the employment of people with disabilities has been and continues to be a matter of vital importance and necessity. A historical review of the literature reveals that discrimination and stigmatization of people with disabilities in the workplace is not only an exclusively modern phenomenon but also a status quo with deep roots in time (Papakonstantinou, 2019), however, extensive research has demonstrated that, historically, employment opportunities for people with disabilities have been and continue to be severely limited (Rumrill & Bishop, 2019), resulting in persistent unemployment, underemployment and generally limited prospects for employment rehabilitation (Walsh et al., 2014).

Since 1972, the employment of people with disabilities has been recognized as a key factor in achieving social inclusion, this factor has come to the fore due to the aging of the population and workforce worldwide, but is particularly noticeable in Europe (European Commission, 2009). Researchers such as Ju et al. (2013) and Vornholt et al. (2017) recognize that people with disabilities constitute a valuable pool of committed workers, who can mitigate labor shortages that employers may face.

Furthermore, in recent decades, there has been a greater emphasis on philosophically informed legislation on the employment of people with disabilities (Baker et al., 2018), highlighting a greater social need: the medical model of disability, which mainly focuses on treatment and rehabilitation, has been replaced by a perspective that emphasizes the special abilities of people with disabilities and the support that employers can receive when employing them. However, despite these efforts and the proven importance of including people with disabilities in the workforce, their employment rates remain consistently low, while layoffs and exclusion from the labor market are increasing (Fraser et al., 2009). In particular, during crises such as the global COVID-19 pandemic, employment problems are rapidly worsening, with significant job losses and other functional, economic and health challenges for people with special needs and chronic diseases (Umucu & Lee, 2020; Strober, 2020), since these people are usually unable to communicate through telework (Schall et al., 2021).

Despite the negative conditions described above, the literature demonstrates that the employment of people with disabilities can be beneficial for themselves and their families, as well as for businesses, employers and the wider social environment (Bishop & Rumrill, 2021). Several studies have identified a positive correlation between employment and different aspects of the lives of people with individual health problems. Work improves quality of life, provides personal satisfaction and self-esteem, makes people independent, facilitates socialization through the creation of friendly bonds and expands social circles, provides leisure opportunities and positively influences the health status of people with disabilities in the medium term (Barneveld et al., 2014). Studies, such as the one conducted by Van Petten et al. (2013), show that work provides individuals with financial autonomy, a sense of responsibility and freedom. It allows them to make decisions and dreams about the future. Financial independence and recognition from work positively affect individuals' self-perception and sense of usefulness. Moreover, as functional abilities and participation in the community are influenced by both individual and external factors, the former are no longer determined exclusively by the type of disability or condition (Umucu & Lee, 2020). Walsh et al. (2014) found an association between employment and the cognitive functioning of people with disabilities and their general well-being, while McKee-Ryan et al. (2005) found that employment has positive effects on people's mental health, leading to increased life satisfaction, enhanced family and marital well-being, and improved self-perception of their physical condition.

Researchers therefore agree that work is beneficial mainly for mental health: work utilizes time and enhances the sense of belonging by offering a purpose in life. Hillier et al. (2011) argue that employment reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression by strengthening interpersonal relationships. Moreover, the provision of a structured professional environment facilitates the therapeutic progress of these individuals (Jansson et al., 2015), since work completes the person, gives meaning to their life and, through productivity, promotes their self-actualization. Among the resulting economic and social benefits of employment are financial independence and opportunities for social interaction with gradually improved communication skills, which ultimately contribute to a higher standard of living.

In contrast, it has been shown that unemployed people with disabilities have more underlying health problems, a lower quality of life, higher rates of depression and lower levels of social inclusion and satisfaction than people who have full or even part-time employment (Muller et al., 2003). In addition, work encourages the creation of social networks, thus promoting the social inclusion of people with disabilities. Work in Western cultures structures social identity, provides a delimited daily routine, facilitates the development – beyond the family circle – of interpersonal ties, stimulates interest in the next day and provides valuable social experiences and opportunities while acquiring new skills (Stephens et al., 2005). At the same time, research highlights the adverse effects of job loss, especially for people with disabilities, which can result in financial difficulties and consequently a deterioration in their well-being and quality of life (Walker et al., 2016).

Furthermore, competitive employment conditions, where people with disabilities work at the same rates as their nondisabled colleagues, have been found to produce beneficial results (Ju et al., 2013). However, only a small percentage (6-10%) of people with disabilities are employed in such positions (Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2008). For the same reason, researchers emphasize the importance of equal access of workers with disabilities to senior positions to achieve parity with their other colleagues (Van Petten et al., 2013). As a result, employment policies should not only focus on hiring workers with disabilities, but also support their professional development, ensuring salary progression, stability and diverse opportunities for activity.

In conclusion, work is a crucial activity for people with disabilities, as it enables economic independence and contributes significantly to their well-being, quality of life and autonomy (Kocman et al., 2017). Despite social exclusion and the general barriers faced by people with disabilities, work offers numerous opportunities for social inclusion and the creation of new relationships (Chadsey & Beyer, 2001). Work plays a decisive role in a successful life, particularly for people with various problems, and is a central parameter that influences various abilities (Stephens et al., 2005).

3. Employability skills

Rosenberg et al. (2012) define employability as the full combination of factors that enable an individual to find, keep and develop a job. Four main factors determine an individual's employability: a) personal and cognitive characteristics, b) the way in which these characteristics are presented to potential employers, c) the social context in which the individual operates, in combination with the incentives and development opportunities provided to him/her, and d) the prevailing economic conditions. Therefore, when we talk today about professional skills or employability skills, we mean general and nonspecialized abilities that individuals must possess to perform all types of tasks (Ju et al., 2013). These skills are essential assets for employees, as they equip them with a comparative advantage, and are necessary at every rung of the professional ladder, from entry-level positions to the corresponding managerial positions.

Extensive research, both in the international and Greek literatures, has been conducted on employment skills, which are more related to individual factors and extend across the entire occupational spectrum, from the most fundamental to the most complex (McQuaid et al., 2005), and which should be able to be effectively applied in the production process. Jansson et al. (2015) described a comprehensive classification of nonspecialized occupational competencies, consisting of sixteen distinct categories. These categories have been further organized into six general areas, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding and classifying the set of skills required in the occupational context. These include a) basic literacy skills, writing skills and computer skills, b) communication skills involving the effective use of spoken language and active listening to the interlocutor, c) adaptive problem-solving skills, related to the production of new ideas to address pre-existing challenges, as well as critical thinking with practical implications, d) developmental skills, which involve personal and professional career management and include aspects such as self-esteem, motivation, goal setting and achievement, e) teamwork skills, which involve a range of interpersonal skills, including effective communication, collaboration and negotiation skills, and, finally, f) influence and impact skills, such as understanding collaborative culture and active participation in leadership.

4. The role of education and teachers

Teachers are key factors in the inclusion and facilitation of the work integration of people with individualized problems using a variety of professional skills, which can collectively influence the pedagogical landscape. One fundamental consideration in this area is the development of inclusive teaching techniques, a belief shared by the majority of teachers: teachers are the first to recognize the importance of these tactics as necessary for the integration of people with disabilities in any work environment. Competence in this area includes the adaptation of educational materials and teaching methods to cover a wide range of learning requirements and needs and ultimately create an educational framework that favors the success of all students (Khan et al., 2018).

Alongside the implementation of inclusive teaching, the concept of adaptability emerges as a key pillar of educational policy. As a dynamic environment, the classroom must be adaptable to respond to the diverse needs of students with disabilities. This adaptability, as an invaluable quality in a teacher's skill set, should extend to key modifications of both lesson plans and activities. The principles of collaboration strongly echo the educational ethos. All relevant stakeholders, teachers, special education professionals, and family support staff, recognize the importance of collaboration between those involved in creating an environment that promotes the overall development of students with disabilities. Such a collaborative environment enables teachers to provide a unified and integrated learning experience, effectively promoting the educational process. In this context, the application of differentiated teaching techniques is fundamental. For the same reason, educators emphasize the importance of adapting pedagogical strategies to individual abilities and multiple learning profiles. The personalized strategy includes differentiated modifications in the delivery of the material, the provision of supplementary support, and even the implementation of alternative assessment methods (Mathrick et al., 2017).

Effective communication is also recognized as a cornerstone of teacher interactions with students, colleagues, and families of children with disabilities. These interactions are supported through honesty, sensitivity, and accuracy, enhancing a sense of inclusion and mutual understanding between the different parties involved in the educational process (Domović et al., 2016). When interacting with people with disabilities, teachers should emphasize empathy and tolerance. These characteristics combine to create an environment that encourages support, understanding, and constructive learning experiences (Domović et al., 2016). Moreover, the use of assistive technologies is considered an invaluable asset. The judicious integration of modern technology into education enhances the learning potential of students with disabilities, increasing their opportunities for progressive improvement (Domović et al., 2016).

In addition, managing student behavior in diverse classroom environments requires a preplanned arsenal of strategies. Teachers are aware of the importance of methods that foster a positive, inclusive classroom climate, encourage harmonious interactions and minimize disruption and disruption (Zhang et al., 2021). As a test of their dedication, some teachers even emphasize the importance of advocating for the interests of students with disabilities. To ensure equitable provision of support, this approach often extends beyond the classroom to incorporate both the dynamics of the school environment and the broader social context (Zhang et al., 2021). As educators navigate the maze of a demographically diverse student body, including students with disabilities and special educational needs, gaining access to cultural heritage becomes particularly important. The ability of these students to maintain inclusive balances, which are related to their diverse backgrounds and experiences, is enhanced by their awareness of the different cultural nuances that exist (Zhang et al., 2021). Thus, the perspective of educators must converge on a dynamic mosaic of professional skills, all of which work together to promote inclusive education and enable the seamless integration of people with disabilities. This colorful mosaic is anchored in an unwavering commitment to fostering an educational environment that promotes diversity, cultivates empathy, and ensures that all students start on an equal footing on the path to knowledge and professional rehabilitation.

In essence, teachers' views on the professional skills required for seamlessly integrating people with disabilities into the workforce are influenced by a multitude of complex factors. Cumulatively, these factors shape students' positions, attitudes and methodology regarding inclusive education and facilitate the integration of students with disabilities into the productive phase of life. Examining these influences not only helps us to understand overall, but also highlights the perspectives from which teachers should approach their work (Moreu et al., 2021). Central to this dynamic interaction is the educational background and training of teachers. Their actions are significantly influenced by their nature, extent of special education and training, and preparatory training in inclusive pedagogical techniques. Teachers who have received comprehensive training often demonstrate a deeper understanding of the competencies necessary for the effective inclusion of people with disabilities in a variety of professional fields (Moreu et al., 2021).

In addition, personal experience plays an important role in shaping teachers' perspectives. Interpersonal contact with people with disabilities, whether they come from family, social relationships, or personal experiences in their wider environment, has the potential to profoundly influence teachers' beliefs and actions. Positive experiences have been observed to inspire empathy and equip individuals with a firm commitment to the principles of inclusive practices (Moreu et al., 2021).

The cultural and social norms that apply in a given social context around disabled people also have a distinct impact on the way teachers approach things. Prevailing social perceptions of inclusion and disability helps teachers determine the value of specific skills, since the social narrative about the inclusion of people with disabilities always influences teachers' interpretations of the professional role that people with disabilities can take on. The cumulative weight of professional experience undoubtedly shapes teachers' perspectives in a substantial way. The duration and nature of a teacher's engagement with the subject of special education can significantly shape their attitudes. Teachers who have

travel a path full of experience tend to have a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with the education or inclusion of students with disabilities (Ainscow, 2020). In addition, the institutional system within which teachers operate is of paramount importance. Collectively, institutional policies, accessible resources, and the provision of necessary support influence how teachers approach inclusion. Institutions that prioritize inclusion and provide generous support services enable teachers to use more auspicious and effective methods (Ainscow, 2020).

Teachers' personal beliefs and values also contribute to the substance of their teaching. Teachers who champion the unwavering values of equality, social justice, and diversity are more likely to embrace all students without exclusion and to passionately advocate for the necessary skills as future professional assets for learners (Moreu et al., 2021). Engaging with the perspectives of parents of students with disabilities and the students themselves also contributes significantly to shaping the final work, with remarkable results. Such interaction provides teachers with a deeper understanding of the desires and aspirations of these individuals, thereby strengthening their commitment to promoting a more supportive educational environment (Ainscow, 2020). Additionally, participation in workshops, seminars, and programs focused on special education and inclusive pedagogies is an important influence. These opportunities broaden teachers' horizons, introducing them to new strategies and techniques that enrich their toolkit (Leijen et al., 2021). Equally important are the effects of media images and access to resources. Media portrayals of disability and inclusive education, combined with the visibility of supportive resources that result in successful inclusion outcomes, can actively shape teachers' perceptions by providing concrete, real-world examples of the benefits that arise from these educational practices (Leijen et al., 2021). The complex structure of legal and policy requirements related to the rights of people with disabilities and their education also has a tangible impact. Teachers' knowledge of these legal requirements and guiding principles influences their understanding of the necessary skills and accommodations for the successful inclusion of people with disabilities (Leijen et al., 2021). Finally, teachers' personal motivation is a key influencing factor. Teachers often have a sincere desire to positively impact the lives of students with disabilities. This intrinsic motivation increases their receptivity to new concepts and strategies in the field of inclusive education (Leijen et al., 2021). In conclusion, teachers' perspectives on the key competencies required for the smooth integration of people with disabilities into the workforce are the result of a dynamic convergence of personal experiences, professional environments, prevailing social trends and comprehensive and continuous lifelong learning. Recognizing and understanding these diverse factors is of paramount importance for promoting an educational environment that strongly promotes the successful and harmonious integration of people with disabilities into any professional environment.

5. Future Directions

In light of these findings, some recommendations for practical implementation emerge. These include developing personalized training programs that emphasize improving communication and technology skills, promoting awareness campaigns to educate employers about the value of technology skills, and promoting the importance of personal characteristics such as integrity and adaptability (Vouglanis, 2023; 2024; Vouglanis & Drigas, 2023; Vouglanis & Driga, 2023; 2024; Vouglanis & Salapata, 2024). In addition, promoting collaboration between educators and employers and involving people with disabilities and special educational needs in the research process are essential steps to support the vocational rehabilitation of people with disabilities and create inclusive working conditions. Future research could explore the effectiveness of skills development programs, cross-cultural differences in perceptions of skills, and differences in the added value that skills acquire through the job sector. People with disabilities and special educational needs can and must approach work integration with objective and equal employment conditions, without exclusions. This can be achieved with continuous and long-term in-depth studies and proposals in this field.

6. Discussion

A variety of research studies and articles from the international literature on the integration of people with disabilities into the labor market provide important data on the factors that facilitate the transition of young people with disabilities from the school environment to work (Gilson et al., 2018; Landmark et al., 2010; Pallisera et al., 2012; Wagner, 2012). Although the combination of multiple factors influences individuals' path toward social and professional integration (type of disability, individual functionality, family socioeconomic background), the level of education received by the person with disability is confirmed to be the key element that particularly influences the possibility and type of transition into the labor market (Landmark et al., 2010; Lindsay et al., 2016; Lindstrom et al., 2011). It is accepted that the school environment, particularly teachin environments, as well as interactions with peers, provide students with disabilities and special educational needs with both fundamental knowledge that is necessary for the adaptation of their functionality to each future environment and social stimuli aimed at cultivating communication skills, which are necessary for the path of people with a disability toward adulthood. The period of secondary education is particularly

critical for adolescent students, as it is the stage where young people plan for the future and make decisions regarding their transition to adulthood (Landmark et al., 2010; Pallisera et al., 2016). Furthermore, secondary education is a fundamental field for promoting opportunities for integration into the labor market, as it provides easy access to families of young people with disabilities, so that they can collaborate with educational staff with the ultimate goal of designing an appropriate personalized program to prepare young people with disabilities for independent living and entry into the labor market (Pallisera et al., 2016).

In conclusion, we emphasize the importance of all digital technologies in the field of education and in disabilities training. These technologies are highly effective and productive and facilitate and improve assessment, intervention, and educational procedures through mobile devices that bring educational activities anywhere [56-60], various ICTs applications that are the main supporters of education [61-81], and AI, STEM, and ROBOTICS [82-87] that raise educational procedures to new performance levs. In addition, the development and integration of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and the development of emotional intelligence [88-109], accelerates and improves educational practices and results more than those, particularly in children with disabilities, treating domain and its practices like assessment and inclusion.

7. Conclusion

According to international literature, the priority of secondary education for young people with disabilities and special educational needs should be the cultivation of students' social skills, as it is one of the most important deficits of these specific disability subgroups that hinder both their socialization within a school context and the functional adaptation of individuals during their movement and interaction in the community. Furthermore, the ability to communicate functionally is a strong qualification for seeking more employment prospects during the transition to the labor market, mainly in professions where teamwork or customer service are encountered. Based on the above parameters, we conclude that there is an urgent need to implement career and vocational training programs to develop the social skills required during post-school employment, to broaden potential employment prospects during the transition to employment for young people with disabilities and special educational needs in the job search.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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