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Youth with Disabilities: Community Living on the Rescue

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Key points

Approximately, 1.000.000 people in Greece are people with disabilities (PWD). Despite years of evolution in the way education of the PWD and their working reintegration is viewed, and a thorough EU Strategy regarding the goals and opportunities in those fields, Greece is failing to provide an inclusive educational experience, with equal treatment and link to the job market to young people whose social group is highly vulnerable, especially in times of financial instability. To address the issue, this policy brief suggests a series of actions that the community can enable:

- Creation of a youth centre specially designed for PWD.
- Reformation of at least one school facility in every neighborhood.
- Initiation of an informative policy which aims in raising awareness for the matter through open discussions and forums.
- Ensured link to all aspects of social life, and especially link to the job market.

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Introduction

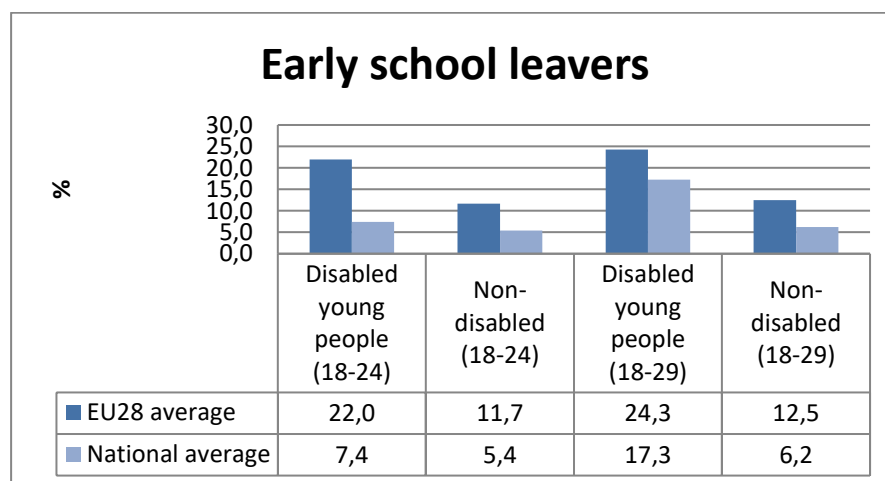
Greece, as an EU member-state, with one of the lowest rates of success when it comes to integration of disabled people in the educational system, as well as, their proper social and working inclusion, is falling behind when it come to meeting the goals set by the EU Agenda for 2020 and 2030. According to research data published in 2018, in Greece 42,2% of the dropouts who had only completed the lower secondary education in 2016 were people with disabilities.¹ It is indicative that as we proceed to higher levels of education the rate of disabled dropouts rises significantly. Those developments come far for meeting the criteria and the goals set by the EU and our own value system as a democratic society. Despite national educational regulations, their weak and strong points, there is no doubt that measures for better social and educational integration of the disabled youth can and should be taken on a community level.

Analysis

Main obstacles for the PWD and their educational inclusion

The main problems PWD face when it comes to equal participation in the mainstream educational facilities in Greece is the following:

1. **Unsuitable school establishments for PWD.** The majority of mainstream public schools lack appropriate sanitary facilities and washrooms, elevators and ramps, essentially prohibiting people with even mild kinetic disabilities from attending. Indicative is that as the level of education rises the facilities tend to worsen for PWD.²



2. **Special Schools.** The EU Strategy and Training objectives of the EU2020 highlight the significance of inclusiveness for all learners and social integration. In that

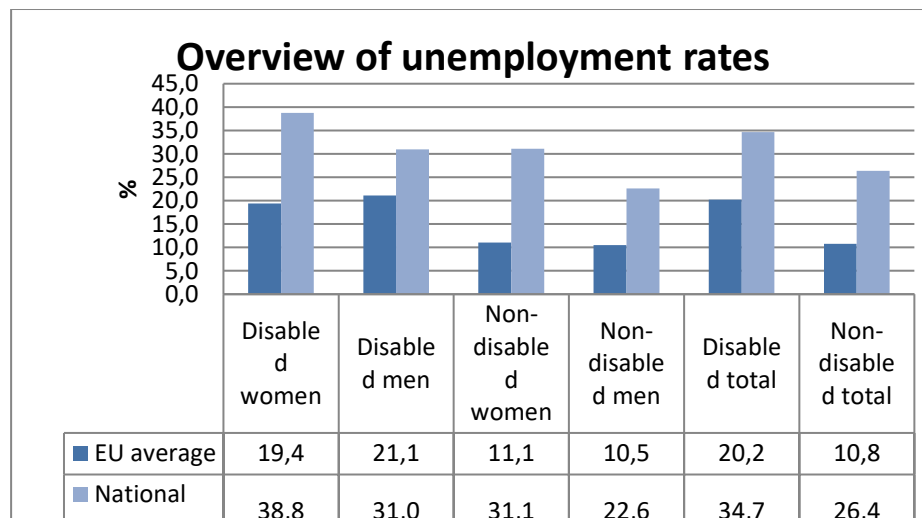


light, we should address the issue of the overall attachment of the Greek Educational system with Special Education, which has roots both cultural and structural. The reason we do not make an innovative turn from an ever-more banding system to a truly inclusive one, is both lack of funding and lack of proper institutional reformation. But banding is an issue that does not only affect the quality of education, as it creates to the students the sense that they are truly inadequate- it affects society itself.

3. **Social Exclusion.** The question that rises is: How can we form an all-inclusive, accepting society if we ban exposure to difference in schools? Let us not forget Greece has one of the highest rates of social exclusion among PWD in the EU 28-. On the other side of the coin, it is highly unlikely people who grow up in different environment and with constant special treatment to develop social and people skills.

4. **Weak link to the job market.** Last but not least, the general poor quality of PWD education which tends to worsen as the level of education gets higher, considerably degrades the chances of those people to be competitive in the job market. Despite, ESPA programs for their better working reintegration, as part of the EU2020 Strategy, PWD consist one of the poorest and most vulnerable social categories in our country. We hold first place when it comes to unemployment of the PWD in the EU, with an impressive rate of 30,5%.

5.



Disability Strategy & Europe 2020

EU disability Strategy is showing the level of importance social equality and prosperity maintain in the EU framework. The main aims of this strategy are³:

(a) To protect the PWD rights as are described by the Charter of Human Rights,

³ Edf-fehp.org. (2019). *Disability Strategy & Europe 2020 | European Disability Forum*. [online] Available at: <http://www.edf-fehp.org/disability-strategy-europe-2020> [Accessed 10 Jan. 2019].



- (b) Ensure their employability,
- (c) Improve and ensure accessibility to educational facilities,
- (d) as well as their social integration.

Before 2010 there was no cohesive strategy implemented for disabled people on an EU level. The most important EU contribution was, firstly the establishment of the principal of accessibility, which ensures that no building which promotes inequality will be funded by EU funding, and secondly the action of the ⁴ European Social Fund, which from 2006 and after is strongly orientated in ensuring social equality for PWD. Since 2010 important steps have been taken, such as the following:

1. Launch of Youth on the Move, an institution whose main aim is the improvement of youth's quality education and working reintegration, PWD included.
2. The Joint Report of the Council and the Commission, which emphasizes on improving accessibility to quality mainstream education and inclusiveness for all students.
3. Collection of data and analysis in regards with the PWD performance in the EU member-states.
4. European Toolkit for Schools, an instrument providing best practices in order to reduce early school leaving by the EU2020.
5. Collaboration and funding with the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE). The main goal is the data collection on the participation of PWD in education on an EU level.

In Greece, education for learners with special needs in mainstream or special schools is co-funded by the EU. Financial support by both the National Investment Program and the ESPA 2014-2020 is given for inclusive policies and projects. Other funding instruments are of course the ESF which primarily funds the operational programme 'Development of Human Resources in Education and Lifelong Learning' of the 2014–2020 NSRF programmes

Recommendations

EU has time and time again stress out the importance of volunteering and community living when it comes to creating inclusive policies for the PWD and resolving relevant

⁴Regulation (EC) No 1081/2006 of the European Parliament and the European Council of 5 July 2006 on the European Social Fund and repealing Regulation (EC) 1784/1999



issues . It encourages what we call the open method of coordination⁵. Regardless the national political and financial state, the existing situation provides both remaining hardships for PWD and the necessary framework to battle them. It is time for the community to step up and act for its own youth.

1. **Creation of a youth centre**, whose principal goal will be to provide support and motivation for young people with any kind of disability to read. Apart from professionals who will help those learners in their own way, the volunteering of their peers as study-companions would be of the outmost importance, as it will form bonds of friendship between people with and without disabilities and ensure their mutual understanding. The building should of course be in total compliancy with the principle of accessibility and in close proximity to public transportation to secure ease access. Such an initiative could be funded by both national funds and ESF funds.⁶

1. **Reformation of at least one school facility** by educational grade, in order to comply with the PWD needs, in every neighborhood. All children and their families should have the right to education without travelling long distances and without the forced choice of enrolling in special schools, especially if the disability does not impose but kinetic limitations. Besides school building are the municipality's jurisdiction.

2. **Enable discussion and information and a policy of raising awareness.** In cooperation with PWD youth our municipality could organize forums where PWD would actually raise their voices about the problems they face and educate our community on how to promote social equality in our everyday lives. We could also engage NGOs and organizations who support similar actions, in those discussions, such as the European Disability Forum, the National Confederation of People with Disabilities, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education etc., and initiate a series of seminars where they could inform disabled youth about their rights, opportunities and working potentials in the EU.

3. **Integration to social life.** Events such as galas, artistic spectrums and others where those people can show their abilities and participate lively in the social life of our community. A workshop for people with disabilities could be formed.

4. **Lastly, link to the job market.** Young people should be offered chances to further educational services in our community free- off charge as well as chances for practice, a very helpful tool when it comes to seeking employment. For instance young PWD could be hired in positions in the municipality services or in firms in our community that will agree to help to gain valuable experience.



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Regulation (EC) No 1081/2006 of the European Parliament and the European Council of 5 July 2006 on the European Social Fund and repealing Regulation (EC) 1784/1999

Article 2, Paragraph 2: “the ESF shall support the priorities of the Community as regards the need to reinforce social cohesion, strengthen productivity and competitiveness, and promote economic growth and sustainable development. In so doing, the ESF shall take into account the relevant priorities and objectives of the Community in the fields of education and training, increasing the participation of economically inactive people in the labor market, combating social exclusion — especially that of disadvantaged groups such as people with disabilities — and promoting equality between women and men and non-discrimination.

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