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## Vocational training in Lithuanian special schools: challenge for educators and mildly mentally disabled pupils

The article seeks to answer the following questions: are disabled pupils satisfied with the model of their vocational education in special school? Does the 'ideal' model of vocational education meet the expectations of the clients with disabilities? Can pupils of special schools participate and to which extent can they take part in the development of the new model of vocational education in Lithuania?

We revealed that students can be active participants of their own educational process and that their opinion is of ostensible value, in spite of still dominating institutional level. The subjective influence of the disabled pupils is either limited or has no importance at all.

Results claim that the opinion of postgraduates and other participants representing vocational education and special schools have no essential differences. Opinions concerning basic subjects *do coincide*.

Pupils of special schools share positive attitudes towards their professional education and preparation for independent life, although negative evaluation scores are also substantial. Negative feedback should serve as the indicator for the optimization of the process of education in vocational institutions for MMD persons.

The ability of the postgraduates from vocational institutions for MMD persons to respond to modern aspects of education is rather limited. It can be treated as a consequence of the clinical education model more than the limitedness of intellectual capacities of the respondents.

In designing the model of vocational education for MMD persons *institutional level prevails*, as the subjective influence of the disabled persons is not significant.

**Research context.** In Lithuania only few investigators have researched the situation of vocational education for the disabled persons. Paradoxically, the investigations concerning vocational education of MMD persons dominate.

In the search for more precise diagnostics, the following foreign investigations were taken into account (Hallahan, Kauffman 2003; Jones 2001; Fink 2001; Semmler

2000a, 2000b; Baudisch 2000; Issler 1999; Wilke 1999; Eisfeld, Hoffmann 1999; Stopel 2001; Bleidick 2003; Malofeev 2001a, 2001b). These investigations had a great impact on the development of the 'ideal' (the term introduced by M. Weber) model of the vocational education in the context of modern social paradigm.

The issues of vocational education for MMD persons in Lithuania were analyzed in different aspects and contexts. Research works of Karvelis (2001a, 2001b, 2001c), Elijošius (1999, 2000, 2001a, 2001b), Ruškus (2001a, 2001b) added a lot to the theoretical framework of the present investigation.

While analyzing scientific literature, some questions arise: are MMD persons satisfied with the existing model of vocational education? Does the "ideal" model of vocational education meet the expectations of MMD pupils? Do MMD pupils participate, and if yes, to what extent can they participate in the development of the model of vocational education in Lithuania? The search for the answers to these questions constitutes the major aim of this article.

**Research methods.** The design of this study is based on the thoughts, observations and reflections of the postgraduates of special vocational schools. All of them live independently and have the experience of competing in labor market: in the case of success, they have some working experience or even a stable work place; in the case of failure- they feel like outcasts in the competitive labor market. Data were collected by applying the method of individual interview. Observation was used as a supplementary method.

The main goal of the diagnostic variables was related to the opinions of young adolescents about the quality of both theoretical and practical disciplines in vocational education institutions; about the ability of these institutions to prepare students for the independent life; and about the changes the students would like to introduce. The method of alternatives was used while conducting the interview: the investigators tried to identify students' opinion about the former procedure of vocational education and to clarify their attitudes towards the changes in that procedure.

The accumulated data were analyzed in two ways: 1) content analysis which was grounded in some methodological works (Straus 2001; Šaparnis 2000; Šaparnis Merkys 2000; Baranauskienė 2003). Firstly, the qualitative analysis of the accumulated answers was conducted; secondly, the expert group identified the categories and quantified them. 2) Some demographic and diagnostic variables connected with the opinions of young adolescents regarding the quality of education in vocational education institutions were processed applying SPSS.PC.11.

**Sampling.** All the participants (405) were only one year after graduation. The respondents were diagnosed as having mild mental disabilities and were successful graduates from different vocational education institutions.

**Research results.** This part of the article reveals the results of the survey and analyzes the answers of the postgraduates to the following questions: 1) 'Which theoretical subjects had great impact on your further working career and independent life?' 2) 'Has a vocational education center taught you a profession and prepared for the independent life?' 3) 'If you were appointed as a headmaster of a vocational

education institution, what changes would you introduce?' Interview based on the method of alternatives was related to the content, methods and procedures of teaching. Each respondent was given 13 questions with 27 alternatives and had to choose the answer based on his personal experience. Formulation of questions took intellectual capacities and the level of education of the respondents into account. The respondents were encouraged to provide evidence for their answers. In that way we not only clarified the choices of the respondents, but also checked the comprehension of the question (table 2).

**Answering the first question**, the postgraduates had to rank the subjects according to the following criteria: 'of no importance', 'may be of no importance', 'do not know', 'may be important', 'important' (table 1).

Subject	Of no importance		May be of no importance		Do not know		May be important		Important	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Theory of the specialty	7	1,7	10	2,5	14	3,4	57	14,1	317	78,3
The Lithuanian language	31	7,7	49	12,1	23	5,6	99	24,4	203	50,2
Culture of language	30	7,4	46	11,4	79	19,5	109	26,9	141	34,8
Moral education	51	12,6	44	10,9	93	22,8	96	23,7	121	30
Religious education	130	32,1	66	16,3	78	19,3	60	14,8	71	17,5
Education for citizenship	61	15,1	53	13,1	96	23,6	98	24,2	97	24
Psychology of communication	14	3,5	15	3,7	80	19,8	101	24,9	195	48,1
Basics of economics	33	8,1	31	7,7	74	18,2	106	26,2	161	39,8
Basics of business	28	6,9	20	4,9	129	31,9	80	19,8	148	36,5
Physical education	70	17,3	29	7,2	33	8,1	81	20	192	47,4
Civil protection	80	19,8	42	10,4	92	22,7	75	18,5	116	28,6
Culture of the mode of life	38	9,4	38	9,4	88	21,7	92	22,7	149	36,8
Applied mathematics	53	13,1	44	10,9	77	19,4	70	17,3	161	39,3
Applied biology	83	20,5	54	13,3	113	27,9	62	15,3	93	23

**Table 1.** The impact of theoretical subjects on working career and independent life (N=405)

Analyzing the answers to the question 'Which theoretical subjects are important to the further professional career and independent lifestyle', we applied traditional strategies specific of quantitative data analysis and calculated out the frequency of theoretical subjects as well as their relative importance to the further professional career and independent lifestyle of MMD persons. Three major groups of theoretical subjects were identified and subdivided into 'important', 'may be important' and 'may be not important'.

**'Important'**. 78,3% of the respondents gave priority to the Theory of the Specialty, 14,1% think that the Theory of the Specialty 'may be important'. All in all 92% of respondents account for the importance and value of this subject.

**The Lithuanian Language** takes position number two. 74,6% of the respondents consider this subject to be 'important' or that it 'may be important'. **Psychology of Communication** is in position number three. 73% of the respondents named it as 'may be important' or 'important'. **Physical Education** (67,4%), **Basics of Economics** (66%), **Culture of Language** (61,7%) are considered to be 'important'.

**'May be important'**. The Culture of the Mode of Life dominates in this group: 59,5% of respondents think that this subject is 'important' or 'may be important'. Applied Mathematics is in position number two (56,6%), Basics of Business is ranked as number three (56,3%). 53,7% of the respondents consider that Moral Education is 'important' or 'may be important'.

**'May be not important'**. This group comprises the following subjects as Education for Citizenship (48,2%), Civil Protection (47,1%), Applied Biology (38,3%), Religious Education (32,3%). Only this percentage of the respondents ranked the above-mentioned subjects as 'important' or 'may be important'.

The answers to the second question, 'Has the vocational education center taught you a profession and prepared for the independent life?' comprise 625 statements, which are subdivided into 9 categories. Qualitative analysis of the statements: **'Positive evaluation of the personal vocational education'** (231 statements), **'Critical attitude of the individual towards his readiness for professional career'** (81 statement), **'Extremely negative evaluation of vocational education'** (54 statements), **'Negative evaluation of vocational education'** (37 statements), **'The content and conditions of teaching do not correspond with the requirements of the modern labor market'** (8 statements), **'Obviously expressed inadequacy of the profession in comparison to the needs of the individual and labor market'** (7 statements) allows us to make a claim that all the above-mentioned statements are linked with individual's preparation for the further professional career. The categories such as: **'Preparation for the independent life is 'sufficient'** (124 statements), **'Preparation for the independent life is 'insufficient'** (70 statements), **'Individual has some doubts about his ability to function independently in life'** 6 statements) describe the individual's readiness or unpreparedness for the independent life. We can state that the category **'Positive evaluation of vocational education'** reveals a positive attitude towards vocational education in general, while other categories of the first group show that some individuals regard their vocational education as more or less insufficient. The intensity of evaluation differs: from doubting, critical attitude, concrete remarks, to absolute nihilism towards vocational education as such. According to the results of the study, 231 positive evaluations of vocational education correspond to 187 more or less critical evaluations.

Statements which belong to the second group of categories reveal an ostensibly positive attitude towards readiness for the independent life (124 statements). The insufficiency of preparation for the independent life (levels differ) is reflected in 76 statements (rating of the statements is presented in Table 1).

**Answers to the third question**, 'If you were appointed as a headmaster of a vocational education center, what changes would you introduce?' comprise 567 state-

ments, which are subdivided into 18 categories (Table 2). The results of the survey show that only 1/5 of the presented statements express a positive attitude towards the former vocational education institution, where no radical or no changes whatsoever should be implemented (category **'Positive evaluation of the vocational education institution'**, 91 statement).

It would be unfair to state that all other categories express negative evaluation. They could form a relative cluster **'Educational and social recommendations'**. This created cluster becomes not only quantitatively important (461 statement versus 91), but also reveals the significance of the shift in the content and process of education as well as provides guidelines for the further work. The rating of such empirical category is not important. For instance, who could deny the significance of such categories: **'The need for additional support for students with lower academic attainment'** (97 statements) or **'Support finding a place of residence'** (7 statements), which occur at the bottom of the rating scale.

Educational recommendations dominate and comprise such important spheres of vocational education as practice placements, wider span of professional choices, optimization of pragmatic elements in the process of teaching, necessity to adapt to the requirements of information technology, etc. Absolute majority of empirical statements is logical, motivated, corresponding to modern requirements for vocational education. For example, the respondents suggest a more responsible attitude towards the organization of practice placements, i.e. looking for a greater variety of placements, having practice placements every year, and etc.

The category of **'Lack of pragmatism in the process of education'** is also important (28 statements). The respondents specify organizational shortcomings, lack of materials for practical tasks, or incompetence of educational staff in this sphere.

The category **'Lack of after-school activities'** (35 statements) can be directly linked with the attitudes and competence of teachers, class teachers and school administration. We admit the fact that, eventually, our country experiences some financial difficulties, but this category in its nature hinges more on the attitudes and competence of the teaching staff than on finances.

Juxtaposition can be noticed between two empirical categories: **'The need for a more strict discipline'** (54 statements) and **'The need for freedom'** (32 statements). It is obvious that 'the need for freedom' and 'the need for discipline' are antonymous. Presumably, both individuals asking for more freedom and for discipline do not perceive the real meaning of these concepts. Consequently, the life in vocational education institutions should be organized in the direction of acknowledged freedom and discipline. Authoritarian discipline very seldom perceives the human mind. The above-mentioned juxtaposition could be treated as a reflection of both teaching styles in vocational education institutions.

The category of **'The need for independence and responsibility'** (23 statements) can be closely linked with the other categories. The respondents presented a clear way how to achieve these qualities: to create real world situations, to provide opportunities for earning money and to allow spending it independently.

The category **'Negative attitude towards the former teaching staff'** (38 statements) is interlinked with the category **'The need for harmonious relationships'** (16 statements). Presumably, harmonious relationships in the institution could lead to more positive attitudes towards teachers.

Categories reflecting social recommendations could be treated as ambiguous: **'The need for better material-living conditions within vocational education institutions'** (59 statements), **'The need for support in finding a job'** (34 statements), **'The fear of stigma'** (25 statements), **'Support in finding the place of residence'** (7 statements). The category **'The need for better material-living conditions in vocational education institutions'** could be interpreted as maximalist expectations of young people, inadequate perception of a situation or inability to estimate down to earth possibilities of the school headmaster; while the categories **'The need for support in finding a job'** and **'The fear of stigma'** are rational and could be objectively grounded. May be it is not the function of a vocational institution to provide support for their postgraduates in finding a job, but, preferably, this institution could be on the list of supporters for those who feel desperate in a competitive labor market. Similar situation is with the fear of stigma.

Vocational institution is not responsible for society awareness, but it is accountable for the successful professional adaptation of its postgraduates. Furthermore, if the name of the institution prevents a student's positive self-esteem, provokes his fear and even stigma, attention should be paid to this fact. Another category **'Support in finding a place of residence'** is also grounded. We assume that one of the functions of a social pedagogue is to take care of the further life of the orphans.

**The fourth group of questions** was designed to obtain empirical data about the content, methods and procedures of teaching process. The survey was conducted applying the method of alternatives (precise results of the survey are presented in Table 3).

In order to facilitate the process of analysis, all questions were subdivided into three groups: 1) Questions revealing the attitudes of the respondents towards the basic principles of educating disabled individuals; 2) Questions disclosing the attitudes of the respondents towards education for life in vocational institutions; 3) Questions showing the attitudes of the respondents towards the development of professional skills.

The analysis of the **first group of questions** allows us to state that majority of the respondents are in favor of the dualistic model of vocational education (50,9%). **The liberal labor market model** was the least popular among the respondents (10,1%). 35,6% of the respondents were for the **mainstream school model**, which is best known to the postgraduates and all of them have their personal experience in it (the definitions of all three models were presented to the respondents in language intelligible for them). Those in favor of the dualistic model motivated their choice by stating that it is very important to gain professional experience within the premises of an enterprise, although they admitted that knowledge acquired at school is also significant. Moreover, mainstream school performs the function of the contact person between a student and an enterprise. Respondents in favor of the liberal labor market

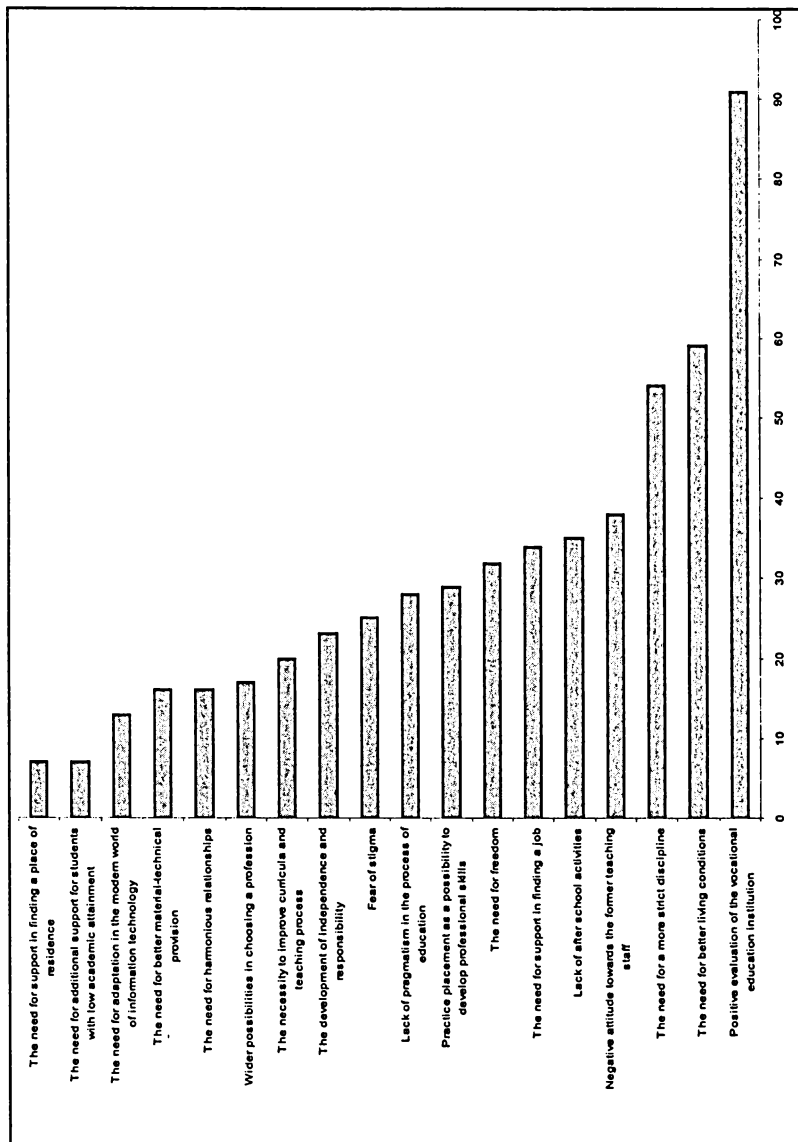


Table 2. The results of content analysis (categories are presented in the order of importance)

model claimed that mainstream school education is unnecessary; that acquisition of good professional skills will help them to survive later in their independent lives. Those who chose the mainstream school model were satisfied with everything, i.e. they would not like to introduce any changes into the process of their education.

The opinions concerning the procedure of admission to vocational education institutions split into 50%–50%. 50,9% of the respondents thinks, that **students can enroll for the course without any trial** (because ‘one should study what he likes’, because ‘otherwise there will be no use’ etc.). 49,1% think that **a student has to try a number of professions before making his final choice** (‘one can better know what he is good at, what he could achieve while studying’, etc.).

Majority of the students are in favor of **rather strict control on the duration of the studying process** (57,3%), providing the following evidence for their choice: ‘only that way can everybody be motivated to study, only then can there be order and discipline’. 39% of the respondents are for the **individualized duration of studies**. The grounds for such a claim are as follows: ‘otherwise one can leave a vocational institution without any knowledge, not everyone has equal capacities for learning’, etc.).

53,6% of the respondents consider that **acquiring one profession is enough**, otherwise it might be too complicated to study: ‘it is better to acquire one profession, but successfully; acquiring one profession is enough, otherwise, it might cause difficulties, if you study more’ etc.). 43% of the respondents are sure that it **would be good to acquire several interlinked professions simultaneously**, because ‘it is easier to find a job, if you study more; it is easier to find a job’ etc.).

56% of the respondents reckon that **all students should follow a unified curriculum** on the grounds that ‘everybody has to study the same subjects, there cannot be any exceptions, if the profession is the same, so, consequently, the curriculum should be the same’, etc. 40,7% of the respondents are in favor of the **individualized studying process**, because ‘not everybody can learn everything, why students good for nothing should suffer’.

**The second group of questions** had caused a lot of discussions among the respondents even while they were still students. Even after a short period of their independent lives, postgraduates could hardly find consensus as to what regards their real life skills. Here a paradox can be traced: although 59,8% of the respondents claim that **students’ independence should be encouraged** (‘because it is necessary, it is easier to live later on’), they do not support the methods of education which develop independent skills of an individual. 35,3% of the respondents are for **strict guidance of the lecturing staff** (‘because we are young, disruption in the classrooms might prevail’).

64,6% of the respondents are for the **life in the dormitories**: ‘the life is more disciplined there, everybody is taken care of, and that is necessary’. Only 33,1% of the respondents think that **life in a rented accommodation** is better: ‘one faces the reality of life and gets lost, if one lives independently, he learns to provide for his own needs’.



58,3% of the respondents approve of the former lifestyle, i.e. **to eat at school canteen free of charge**: 'money would not be spent unreasonably, some of the students do not have skills of saving money and might be starving'. 37,3% of the respondents consider that **students should better be given money for food**: 'that way one could learn to manage money, one could eat according to his taste'.

Majority of the postgraduates are for **eating at school canteens (59,5%)**: 'one could spend a lot of time on food making and have less time for studies, some students are unable to make meals by themselves'. 36,5% of the respondents think that **students should buy and make food themselves**: 'that way one could learn more and live easier later on, one could become more independent'.

**The third group of the questions** reveals the attitudes of the postgraduates towards teaching ways and methods. The answers allow us to make a claim that students are in favor of variety in the teaching process. 60% of the students are in favor of variety in the studying process, i.e. **they would like to have practice teaching in different enterprises at least once per week** ('that way they could get to know better the particularities of working conditions and regime of work', we could acquire better working skills). 35,6% of the respondents think that **practice teaching should be organized in the workshops of the school**, stating that 'they feel more relaxed in their own environment, its is better at school'. 58,5% of the postgraduates chose the statement **practice teaching should take place every year** because 'it is easier to learn a profession, the more, the better'. 36,8% of the respondents think that practice teaching should be organized only in the third year of studies: 'it is not work but a play, earlier practice teaching would be bad because we have other things to learn' (all the respondents had their practice teaching only in the third year of studies).

Alternative	Number of respondents	Per cent
Mainstream school model	144	35,6
Dualistic model	206	50,9
Liberal labor market model	41	10,1
Reside in a dormitory	245	64,6
Reside in rented apartments	134	33,1
Are provided with money for food	151	37,3
Get food free of charge	236	58,3
Practice teaching takes place in school's workshops	144	35,6
Practice teaching takes place in different enterprises once per week	246	60,7
Practice placements are organized every year	237	58,5
Practice placement is obligatory in the third year of studies	149	36,8
Students are strictly guided by teaching staff	143	35,3
Independence of students is encouraged	242	59,8

A student tries a number of professions before enrolling for the course	190	49,1
A student knows for sure what he wants and has to be admitted to the course without any trials	197	50,9
It would be good to acquire several interrelated professions at once	174	43
Acquiring one profession is enough, otherwise it might cause difficulties	217	53,6
Students buy and make food themselves	148	36,5
Students eat at the school canteen	241	59,5
Schools do not need yard-keepers, cleaners- students can manage these functions themselves	120	29,6
Students have to study and not to perform the functions of the cleaners	270	66,7
The duration of studies depends on the individual capacities of a student	158	39
The duration of studies is strictly regulated	232	57,3
Students are provided with clothes from the school store	117	28,9
Students get money and can buy clothes independently	264	65,2
All students follow a unified curriculum	227	56
Studying process is individualized	165	40,7

**Table 3.** The interview with young adolescents applying the method of alternatives

The results of the survey proved the fact that students can be active participants of their own studying process and that their opinion should be taken into account.

Comparing the results of the present study with other investigations, for example, vocational education and adaptation of MMD persons and their attitude towards the content of education (Baranauskienė 2003), we can claim that opinions of postgraduates and other participants representing vocational education and social care institutions have no essential differences. Opinions concerning basic subjects *do coincide*. It is possible to state that postgraduates and teaching staff of vocational education institutions; employers; representatives of social care and labor market institutions acknowledge the importance and impact of theoretical education on the process of adaptation and independent lifestyle of MMD persons.

The postgraduates of vocational education institutions share positive attitudes towards their professional education and preparation for independent life, although negative evaluation scores are also substantial. Negative feedback should serve as the indicator for the optimization of the process of education in vocational institutions for MMD persons.

The ability of the postgraduates from vocational institutions for MMD persons to respond to modern aspects of education is rather limited. It can be treated as a consequence of the clinical education model more than the limitedness of intellectual capacities of the respondents.

Practical experience of the researchers as well as the results of the present study provide evidence for the fact that in designing the model of vocational education for MMD persons *institutional level prevails*, as the subjective influence of the disabled persons is not significant. Consequently, a hypothetical statement can be made: the higher the level of participation of the disabled persons in the development of the “ideal” model of vocational education is, the better preconditions for the realization of the expectations of MMD persons can be provided.

We advocate for the emancipatory-participatory approach towards the development of the vocational education and adaptation of the disabled individuals in our society.

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## Kształcenie zawodowe w litewskich szkołach specjalnych: wyzwanie dla nauczających i dla uczniów z lekkim upośledzeniem umysłowym

### Streszczenie

Autorka artykułu poszukuje odpowiedzi na następujące pytania: Czy niepełnosprawni uczniowie są usatysfakcjonowani modelem kształcenia zawodowego proponowanym w szkołach specjalnych? Czy „idealny” model kształcenia zawodowego spełnia oczekiwania osób niepełnosprawnych? Czy uczniowie szkół specjalnych mogą uczestniczyć (i do jakiego stopnia) w tworzeniu nowego modelu kształcenia zawodowego na Litwie?

Z naszych badań wynika, że uczniowie są w stanie aktywnie uczestniczyć we własnym procesie edukacyjnym, i że ich opinie mają wartość pozorną, pomimo wciąż dominującego instytucjonalnego poziomu podejmowania decyzji. Subiektywne oddziaływanie niepełnosprawnych uczniów jest ograniczone lub zupełnie nieważne.

Z rezultatów wynika, że opinie absolwentów oraz innych uczestników badania reprezentujących kształcenie zawodowe i szkoły specjalne nie różnią się zbytnio. Opinie dotyczące spraw podstawowych są zbieżne.

Uczniowie szkół specjalnych są pozytywnie nastawieni do własnego kształcenia zawodowego i przygotowania do samodzielnego życia, chociaż odsetek głosów negatywnych również był dość znaczny. Odpowiedzi negatywne powinny posłużyć jako wskazówki w celu optymalizacji procesu edukacji w placówkach kształcenia zawodowego dla osób z lekkim upośledzeniem umysłowym.

Możliwości absolwentów szkół zawodowych dla osób z upośledzeniem umysłowym w stopniu lekkim do oddziaływania na współczesne aspekty edukacji są raczej ograniczone. Może to być raczej konsekwencją klinicznego modelu edukacji niż samego ograniczenia zdolności umysłowych osób badanych.

Przy tworzeniu modelu kształcenia zawodowego dla osób z lekkim upośledzeniem umysłowym *przeważa instytucjonalny poziom podejmowania decyzji*, gdyż subiektywne oddziaływanie osób niepełnosprawnych nie jest znaczące.