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## **Students Professionalism in Secondary Vocational Schools in Palestine: Strengths and Shortcomings of WBL Practices**

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### **Abstract**

Traditional and informal WBL have long been known in Palestinian local societies and traditions as part of TVET education's oldest learning in work practices. Under direct teacher supervision and coordination, secondary vocational school (SVS) students have been sent to conduct their practical training for a certain period before graduation with a local individual private sector. In the past fifteen years, the increasing number of TVET students, schools, and majors has caused challenges for traditional and informal WBL. Accordingly, new WBL practices and cooperation with the private sector have increased. This paper examines the old and the new practices of WBL. It considers the strengths and shortcomings of these practices in SVSs in Palestine and how WBL practices in Palestine sustain and develop students' professionalism under the rapidly changing social, political and economic situations in the region that affect both education and the market. This article is practice-based, exploring and analysing practices of SVSs teachers and students who conduct WBL. This paper argues that the lack of a regulatory framework presents a difficult challenge to secondary vocational schools. Similarly, there are no official arrangements with the private sector and, most importantly, there is a dearth of efficient WBL practices that link students with the market to provide students not only with professional competencies, but also with social and personal competencies. A real opportunity beckons if TVET schools, namely teachers, students and the school heads take more concerted action to adopt new learning in work practices such as fostering self-reliant learning, which can empower all students to gain long-lasting professional and personal competencies and "is combined with an enormous growth of their self-consciousness resulting in much more independent action" (Hoepfner & Koch 2015, 12).

**Keywords:** *Work-Based Learning, Secondary Vocational Schools, Self-Reliant Learning, Professionalism in TVET, Project-Based Learning*

### **1 Introduction**

Job opportunities for graduates who hold academic specialisations in Palestine have become scarcer due to the increasing number of universities and colleges and a significant rise in the number of graduates. Statistical data indicates that around 44,000 students graduate from academic universities annually, then are released into the labour market. The political situation has compounded the problem of finding a job, due to the deteriorating Palestinian economy and the state industry, along with the failure of the private sector to offer more opportunities for graduates.

TVET is considered one of the effective solutions to address the unemployment crisis. The importance of TVET lies in two determinants: 1) the Palestinian labour market's abundant need for technical and professional majors, and 2) high unemployment rates. SVSs in Palestine are supposed to provide the labour market with skilled and craftsmen (level 2&3 of TVET) (GIZ 2010). Students at this level must gain the professional and personal skills that qualify them to start work immediately after graduation, not merely to pursue their academic studies. However, SVSs students are currently being directed to pursue academic studies. The absence of efficient WBL practices and methodologies creates a gap in the market which, in turn, increases the unemployment rate. Accordingly, this negates the importance of SVS objectives and goals.

With the significant increase in the number of SVSs, majors and students over the last 15 years, the government has started to adopt strategies, practices and arrangements to provide learning in work for SVSs students which will enable them to gain skills and competencies that meet the needs of the market. Educational reform of TVET was initiated in 1996, seeking to improve the quality of TVET educational output. The overall objective of the reform is to create a knowledgeable, competent, motivated, entrepreneurial, adaptable, creative and innovative workforce in Palestine (GIZ 2010). A skilled workforce that is expected to contribute to poverty reduction, and to social and economic development (UNESCO-UNEVOC 2012). One reform strategy was the development of a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) policy to secure WBL opportunities for SVSs students which would improve the quality of education output (Samara 2018). However, the high unemployment rate amongst SVSs graduates demonstrates that policy reform is not achieving its intended goals concerning the use of effective WBL. As a result, the skills mismatch in the region (Maclean & Fien 2017) is widening. Poor policy framework and inexperienced administrators of TVET programmes exacerbate the issue: Constraints of Implementing Work-based Learning in TVET (Haruna & Kamin 2019).

This paper examines the three tracks of SVSs in Palestine concerning WBL and its practices; discussing challenges and opportunities for students and how students and teachers are addressing and applying these practices in the light of teachers' inadequate qualifications concerning WBL practices, students' qualifications, curriculum design, the private sector and SVS objectives and goals. The paper first considers how traditional and informal WBL practices and arrangements in SVSs were arranged and identifying reasons for successful implementation. The paper then outlines the three tracks, how WBL is arranged and who benefits from it. Next, it provides an overview of the WBL debate in Palestine and examines the potential to transform WBL practices already conducted in schools, pointing out the opportunities for transformation. The paper concludes with a discussion on adopting effective WBL practices in SVSs in Palestine to harmonize education output with market needs. Thus, the paper will examine; To what extent are adopted WBL tracks in SVSs in Palestine being implemented? This will include opportunities and challenges of each track for all actors involved, including students, teachers, the private sector and the government, as represented by the Ministry of Education. Qualitative methods (in-depth and expert interviews) were used

to collect and analyze data from TVET experts, key figures in the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoE&HE), SVS teachers and students from all majors and all WBL tracks adopted by SVSs in Palestine.

## **2 Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 Work-Based Learning**

Throughout history, learning through practice has been important for developing occupational competence to serve both the community and personal needs. Skills and competencies gained are not only useful for the profession but also can be used for personal development (Billett 2013). “WBL philosophy is based on the concept that students need to be in a real work situation for effective learning outcomes” (Rasul et al. 2014, 23). That is to link theory and practice in a relevant way. “Work based learning refers to learning that occurs through undertaking real work, through the production of real goods and services, whether this work is paid or unpaid” (Sweet 2013, 167). “Work-based learning, however, is the means through which a discipline is delivered, not the discipline to be studied. So work-based learning is not a subject for study – it is a mechanism for learning” (Gray 2001, 4). Work-based learning is a form of “experiential learning” (Sweet 2013, 169). That is to learn from personal experience rather than receiving information.

### **2.2 WBL opportunities and limitations (challenges)**

“WBL as a pathway to delivering competency-based education” (Bahl & Dietzen 2019, 3). That is to say, it improves the value of education for workforce development. WBL could produce graduates who have the skills to meet the needs of the market. WBL not only benefits universities and industry, it also has an impact on the culture of teaching and learning. WBL improves the following: youth transitions; individual career development; raises enterprise productivity and innovation; improves the quality of TVET education; develops problem-solving skills and facilitates distribution of costs and benefits between the firm and the learner (Sweet 2013). It also drives learners or students toward maturity and growth through the development of social experiences in the workplace and can accordingly teach entrepreneurship skills (Lasonen 2005). Thus, WBL could enhance the employability of graduates in the employment sector (Sweet 2013). WBL combines the strengths of the industrial sector and the training institution.

Challenges facing successful WBL include instructor’s qualifications on the one hand, as well as the level of collaboration between educational institutes and employers or other parties concerning rules and responsibilities (Rasul et al. 2014). Other limitations can be identified in outcomes and processes of learning (Billett 2013), including consideration of educational purposes, curriculum provisions, pedagogic practices, and actions in practice settings. When these considerations are taken into account to develop learning experiences, “a comprehensive framework of learning through practice is now warranted” (Billett 2013, 143).

These challenges vary from one country to another, depending on the education system, training pathways, traditions and adopted WBL models. To advance WBL models effectively and successfully factors such as governance, quality and partnerships should be taken into consideration (European Commission (EC) 2013).

**Work-based Learning (WBL) aims at providing students with real-life work experiences and long-lasting skills and competencies.** The ultimate goal of WBL practices in TVET is to engage students in the labour market and support them in their search for employment. WBL helps students to acquire practical experience and personal skills as “competencies cannot be taught through instructions but have to develop as the learner actively engages with a task” (Schröder 2019, 88). WBL helps students to engage in the task and translate the theoretical knowledge they acquire in the classrooms into practical skills and competencies at both professional and personal levels. Further, WBL helps students to be creative, innovative and discover hidden skills and competencies that can only be revealed in the workplace. Teachers must be able to “identify students who are the most capable, inclined to independent creative activity, and the need to create conditions and encourage them to manifest themselves maximally” (Isabekov & Sadyrova 2018, 44). Accordingly, and with the continuous follow-up and support of their teachers, many students can start to work independently. WBL helps students to develop their careers. It can raise enterprise productivity and lead to better youth transitions (Sweet 2013).

### **3 Traditional and Informal WBL in Palestine**

Learning in the workplace has long been known in TVET in Palestine as informal arrangements between the school, the teacher, the student or his parents and individual local businesses. SVSs teachers were aware of the local market and workshops close to their own profession. Coordination occurred informally through good connections between the SVSs and local individual businesses. Secondary Vocational Schools’ graduates used to find internships or so-called practical training in one of the local small private businesses in the village or in the city where students lived. It was easy to cooperate with the private sector and find a training place for every SVS student due to a number of factors; 1) the number of SVS was very small, not exceeding four or five students for each major; 2) SVS taught a limited range of practical majors such as carpentry, radio and TV, car mechanic, and welding; 3) the private sector and local individual small businesses needed SVS graduates, so students finishing their practical training would get hired by the private sector where they obtain their training.

It was very rare for SVS graduates to go to universities or higher education institutes. Students moved from school to the market directly by getting employed or starting their individual businesses and workshops. Students were studying at SVSs to enter a profession after twelfth grade rather than continuing with academic studies. This added weight to the SVS in the local market and the local community by providing skilled craftspeople.

In Palestine, WBL for SVSs practices and methodologies is determined by a range of factors. Different cities have different needs and there is considerable variation from one school to another. Major differences include; 1) the nature of local business – different professions required in industrial cities, agricultural cities and tourist cities; 2) proximity to the Israeli market and consumers; 3) population; 4) the major SVS in each city, for example, agricultural, technical or industrial; 5) donors and their activities, programmes and projects; 6) level and quality of cooperation between local stakeholders and the SVS; 7) the size of the private sector and the capacity of private sector representatives such as the chamber of commerce; 8) teacher qualifications, motivation and creativity and above all; 9) local market demand for SVS graduates. Local labour markets are different from one city to another and this influences WBL practices as followed by the SVS. Cooperation with the workplace has to be calibrated accordingly to open up opportunities and remove barriers for students. An apprenticeship may be successful in one city, but not in another, or it may be appropriate for one major but not for another major. Only three SVSs in Palestine follow the apprenticeship model and not all SVSs work with a certificate of professional competence in WBL. Ultimately, the school must choose which WBL practice has the most potential for students to achieve the best outcome.

#### **4 The Current Three tracks of Secondary Vocational Schools (SVSs): opportunities and shortcomings**

*There are three tracks in secondary vocational schools in Palestine. Namely; the normal track, the certificate of professional competence track or project-based learning track, and the apprenticeship track.*

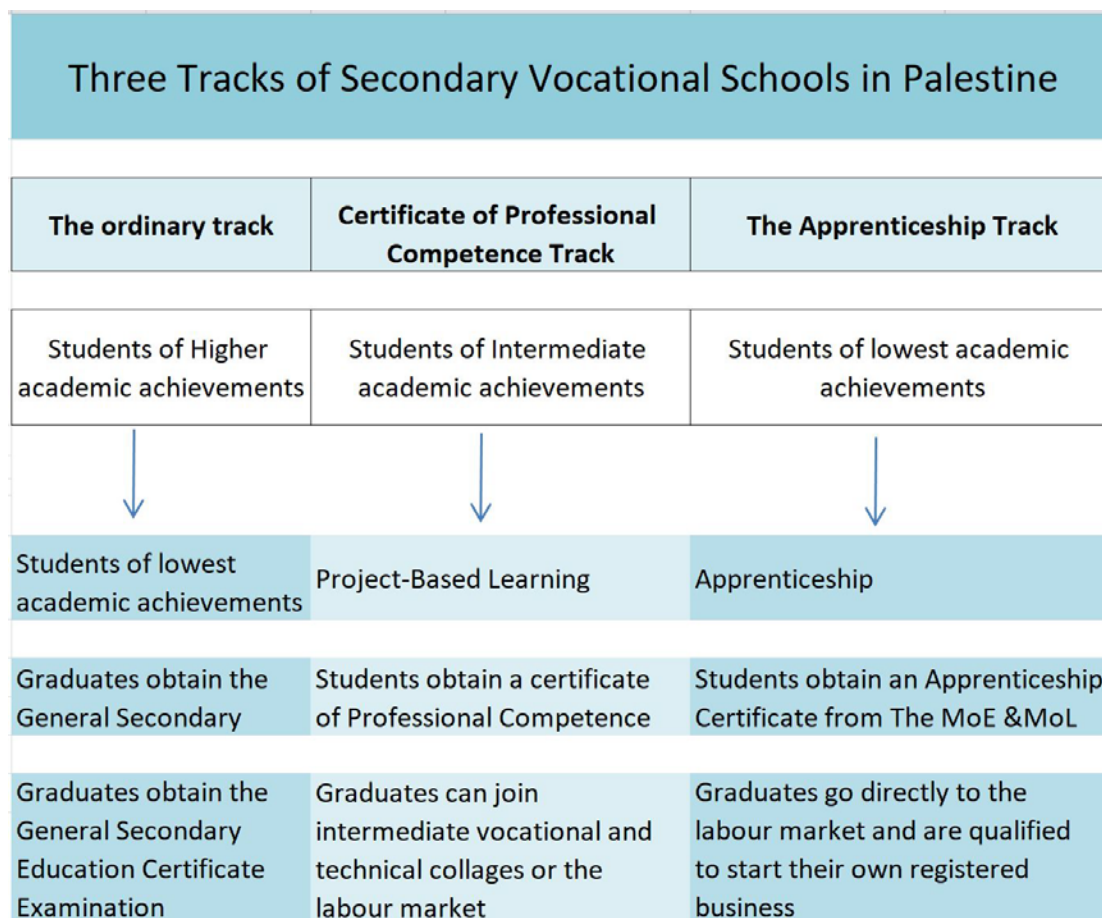


Figure 1: Three tracks of Secondary Vocational Schools in Palestine

#### 4.1 The ordinary track

This track is called Tawjihi (**the General Secondary Education Certificate Examination**). Students study theoretical and practical specialisation subjects and take high school exams conducted by the Ministry of Education. After passing the exams, students are qualified to enter university or the labour market. This track qualifies students for higher academic institutes and universities. Most of the students who graduate from this track join universities and study for a BA degree over a period of four to five years. Students in this track do not follow any WBL practices. Practical experience is limited to the workshop they take at school with their teacher for the specialization subjects.

#### 4.2 Certificate of Professional Competence Track

In 2018, the Palestinian Ministry of Education approved a new amendment to the general secondary school examination system which sought to create a generation of student graduates ready to engage in the labour market through their acquired professional competencies. This would also reduce unemployment rates among graduates. The high school diploma amendment in SVS allows students to choose between the general secondary examination “Tawjihi” (**the General Secondary Education Certificate Examination**), or to



obtain a certificate of professional competence in the specialist field studied in school. Highlighting the professional competency track developed by the ministry presents an additional option to high school students in vocational and technology branches. Enhanced skills enable them to engage in the labour market or join intermediate community colleges.

This is also a Project-Based Learning track that aims to empower self-reliant learning objectives of critical thinking, creativity, planning and decision making (Hoepfner & Koch 2015). Project-based learning not only teaches professional skills for the school, but also social and personal life skills such as accountability and responsibility, communication, negotiation, collaboration and discipline (Bell 2010). This track is for students with intermediate academic achievements who are less academically qualified than first track students but with higher academic achievements than in the third track (apprenticeship). This gives additional opportunities for students wishing to move to the labour market or vocational and technical colleges. Students can divide the Tawjihi (**the General Secondary Education Certificate Examination**) into two stages. In stage one, grades for academic subjects studied at the school, such as the Arabic language, mathematics, technology, English language, chemistry and physics, are calculated without sitting official Ministry of Education exams. The second stage deals with specialization subjects, which are submitted for MoE exams and supported by a project in students' specializations. A teachers committee will grade the project presented by the student. As a result, students obtain a Certificate of Professional Competence that qualifies them for the labour market or a technical and vocational intermediated college. Students in this track are not qualified to enter university or further academic study, but if they choose to sit Ministry of Education exams in academic subjects, university enrolment is possible.

### **4.3 The Apprenticeship Track**

This track is for students with lower academic achievements than the first and the second track; namely, the Certificate of Professional Competence Track and the apprenticeship Track. The student enters the labour market and starts his/her training from the eleventh grade, whilst continuing to study in the twelfth grade. There is no Tawjihi certificate. Instead, the student obtains an apprenticeship certificate signed by the MoE and the Ministry of Labour. Students spend two days in school studying theoretical and specialist subjects and three days in the workplace. A specialist teacher follows up with students through all of the steps. There is a formal work contract with private sector partners, which must be officially registered by the government. Apprenticeships in the private sector can therefore only be arranged with authorized participants in the project. Indeed, only four Vocational Secondary Schools in Palestine follow this programme due to the official arrangements pertaining to schools, the MoE and the private sector. The Ministry of Education provides work insurance for students. The school is obliged to find a private-sector position for students and also offer further training. Students in this track are paid by their employers. After graduation, most students continue in the same position, having demonstrated that they have the skills and competence needed in the workplace.

## 5 Debate on the WBL practices that are adopted in SVSs in Palestine

There is debate among teachers and TVET experts on the importance of the second and third track - the Certificate of Professional Competence Track and the Apprenticeship Track - and how to apply them effectively. Both, to some extent, offer students of intermediate and low academic achievements a chance to enter the labour market. However, teachers and TVET experts support the apprenticeship track and the certificate of professional competence track, combined with project-based learning, for many reasons; 1) teachers are not qualified enough to facilitate and supervise project-based learning; 2) students with intermediate academic achievements are not qualified to conduct project-based learning and lack the skills to take this track; 3) the curriculum is not designed to teach project-based learning for students. The result is that students and teachers remain unaware of the difference between project-based learning and working on a project. Students receive external support for their projects or research projects without gaining any real and practical skills as outlined in “Impact on Individual Learning: Innovative and Relevant Personal Growth” (Sharipova & Wesseler 2018, 33). Teachers emphasize the importance of this track for students of a higher level of academic achievement, noting that teachers need adequate training to be able to facilitate project-based learning. Teachers must be sufficiently experienced, knowledgeable and interested in teaching this subject to develop their skills in WBL research (Rasul et al., 2014). Nevertheless teachers have emphasised that some students can gain some basic research skills which relate to self-reliant learning objectives (Bell 2010).

The Project-Based Learning track should help students to develop self-reliant learning skills. Rapid changes in technology and market demands, render it a necessity to equip SVS students with skills and competencies which will enable students to adapt and adjust to the increasing demands in the context of technological development and globalization (Ministry of Labor 2013). Equipping students with sustainable skills and competencies does not depend solely on the school and the teacher. The student must take ownership of the objective to learn new skills, competencies, critical thinking, problem-solving and creativity. Personal competencies such as certain conduct, behaviour and attitude can also have a positive effect when students are seeking work in the market. These skills “are widely regarded as key qualifications for modern labour markets” (Stehling & Munzert 2018, 24).

SVSs teachers in Palestine lack TVET qualifications (Samara 2021) and need training on how to implement didactical or methodological concepts concerning WBL. In the specific context of this track, they need to become familiar with project-based learning methodology (Indrawan et al. 2020). Theoretical concepts have no value unless students and teachers understand how to apply them practically. If awareness is lacking, teachers and students will face serious challenges when it comes to implementation. Furthermore, the two tracks should not be determined by academic achievements. All SVS students must join a WBL track that enables them to gain professional and personal competencies or skills. They need to be able to compete with students who graduate from academic branches of secondary schools. Using project-based learning is an efficient strategy to empower students as self-reliant learning. It must follow project-based learning steps whilst still being clearly distinct from a project in



itself. Every student at the school, regardless of their academic achievements, must work on a project in any case. This gives students a better grasp of the market and demand, helping them to develop their business ideas and skills as entrepreneurs. Students can get to know the opportunities and challenges of business and the market, lending them the tools to build basic and strong foundations if they aim to start their own business.

Some teachers, meanwhile, emphasise the importance of apprenticeships and see them as being more relevant than the Professional Competence Certificate. However, project-based learning need not be less important if teachers are qualified and follow the right steps in applying WBL methodology. Their ability to teach this track is key, because “a competent teacher is a form of quality assurance for students’ learning” (Sulaiman et al. 2019, 1). Project-based learning is seen to be easier than apprenticeships as the latter rely on the private sector and the firm’s environment and are dependent on capacity being available for students (Muehlemann & Wolter 2014), whereas project-based learning track depends entirely on the student and the individual ability to learn and explore the market independently. Teachers play the role of facilitator and should follow up with their students. In the case of project-based learning, the onus is on the student to learn, to be creative, inventive, and analytical in finding business ideas. Independence of mind fosters learning and discovery. SVSs must take this into consideration as they start to take practical steps towards the proper application of project-based learning for all students.

From students’ considerations and insights: students who chose the certificate of professional competence track are aware that they have lower academic achievements that only qualify them to finish this track with certain skills – enough to be able to join a vocational college and study for two further years. Following on from this, they can begin working independently or seek a job corresponding to market demand for their profession, for example in carpentry, welding or mining. Students are satisfied with the level of professional skills they acquire from the school, yet, they still need to acquire personal skills that are not provided for within this track. Students can find paid work and feel independent whilst continuing to study at school.

## **6 Conclusion and outlook**

The lack of effective WBL measures and practices in SVSs in Palestine adversely affects the quality of education, reducing graduates’ chances of finding work or embarking on individual work strategies. TVET is considered as one of the effective solutions to address the unemployment crisis. Using WBL in SVS differentiates it from academic schools and academic graduates. As a result, SVS students are likely to stand a better chance of finding work opportunities, having learned the skills and competencies required in the market. TVET must follow effective WBL practices in order to achieve this goal and provide the market with qualified graduates. This can help to reduce unemployment and boost social and economic development. Otherwise, SVSs will continue to launch unqualified graduates into

the market, ultimately increasing unemployment that will, in turn, increase poverty and create gaps in the qualified workforce.

Apprenticeship and project-based learning are two WBL practices in SVSs in Palestine. However, there are many shortcomings for both tracks that hinder their effectiveness for students in achieving the objectives of using these tracks. As the apprenticeship needs and involves more official arrangements between the school and the private sector, project-based learning is an efficient methodology that schools can use to provide students with the necessary skills and competencies to start work or find employment.

The Palestinian private sector has a large and uplifting role in the Palestinian national economy, accounting for approximately 52% of Palestinian workers. Work must be done to harmonize the outputs of SVSs with the needs of the labour market and the private sector. Local TVET employment councils have been established to include many private sector and academic institutions, seeking to play a vital role in improving the labour market situation; promoting employment and self-employment; reducing unemployment and poverty for social and economic development (UNESCO-UNEVOC 2012). This is done by promoting career guidance and counselling activities, and by promoting assistance and guidance in the search for jobs and other related activities. For this purpose, effective WBL practices must be adopted in SVSs.

To adopt and follow effective WBL practices in Palestine, SVSs must develop and design curricula for TVET in line with the objectives of self-reliant learning. Teachers need access to essential training, networks, knowledge and best practices. Teacher qualifications must be developed accordingly (Stehling & Munzert 2018) to include fields such as taxes, economy, business, entrepreneurship, management, financial budgeting. Furthermore, teachers must have a full grasp of the methodology and self-reliant learning steps for their students and be aware of their role as coach and advisor throughout the process (Hoepfner & Koch 2015).

The question is: To what extent can SVSs in Palestine adopt WBL models to develop self-reliant learning? The WBL approach to develop students' skills and competencies is, at once, an opportunity and a challenge.

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