

## Working Conditions of Students Employed Within the Scope of Vocational Education Centers (MESEM): The Case of Mersin

Aytül GÜNEŞER DEMİRÇİ\*

**Abstract:** In recent years, the Vocational Education Centers (MESEM) project—brought to the fore by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) as one of the initiatives aimed at strengthening the processes of education, production, and employment within vocational and technical education, has been reexamined and debate in light of the original rationale behind the emergence of vocational education. Vocational education refers to a system in which students receive in-person training in vocational and technical high schools while completing their apprenticeship, journeyman and master-level training in vocational education centers that function as non-formal education institutions. However, in response to the continuously changing dynamics of working life and the evolving expectations of the labor market, the project has recently been discussed as a policy proposal designed to direct the workforce into working life under classifications such as “student-worker” and “student-apprentice.” Vocational education is considered highly significant in terms of facilitating students’ integration into the labor force by enabling them to transform their theoretical knowledge into practice, acquire work habits, develop their knowledge, and skills, and specialize in a specific occupational field. This study reveals that the working conditions of students employed within the scope of MESEM—implemented as one of the initiatives aimed at strengthening and improving vocational and technical education and opened within Vocational and Technical Anatolian High Schools—are largely shaped by unfavorable circumstances. In the research, this process was examined through the example of students working in schools located central and peripheral districts of Mersin. The study aimed to observe the students’ working conditions concretely and to identify the problems and adverse situations that may arise within this context.

**Keywords:** Vocational education; MESEM; working conditions; cheap labor; occupational health and safety.

### Mesleki Eğitim Merkezleri (MESEM) Kapsamında Çalışan Öğrencilerin Çalışma Koşulları: Mersin Örneği

**Öz:** Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı (MEB) tarafından son yıllarda mesleki ve teknik eğitim konusunda eğitim, üretim ve istihdam sürecini güçlendirecek adımlardan biri olarak gündeme getirilen Mesleki Eğitim Merkezleri (MESEM) projesi mesleki eğitimin ortaya çıkış nedeni üzerinden yeniden tartışılmıştır. Mesleki eğitim, meslek derslerini mesleki ve teknik liselerde yüz yüze alan öğrencilerin çıraklık, ustalık ve kalfalık eğitimlerini yaygın eğitim kurumu olan mesleki eğitim merkezlerinde yapması anlamına gelmektedir. Ancak günümüzde çalışma hayatının sürekli değişen dinamikleri doğrultusunda farklılaşan işgücü piyasasının beklentilerini karşılamak amacıyla, işgücünün “öğrenci-işçi” “öğrenci-çırak” gibi tanımlamalar çerçevesinde çalışma yaşamına yönlendirilmesini sağlayacak bir proje önerisi olarak gündeme getirilmiş ve tartışılmaya başlanmıştır. Mesleki eğitime, öğrencilerin teorik bilgilerini uygulamaya dönüştürerek iş alışkanlıkları kazanmaları, bilgi ve becerilerini geliştirmeleri ve belirli bir mesleki alanda uzmanlaşmaları amacıyla iş gücüne entegrasyonlarını sağlamak bakımından büyük önem atfedilmektedir. Bu çalışma, mesleki ve teknik eğitimin güçlendirilmesi ve geliştirilmesi amacıyla hayata geçirilen adımlardan biri olarak değerlendirilen ve Mesleki ve Teknik Anadolu Liseleri bünyesinde açılan MESEM kapsamında çalışan öğrencilerin çalışma koşullarının önemli ölçüde olumsuz bir yapı içinde şekillendiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Araştırmada, söz konusu süreç, Mersin ili merkez ve ilçe okullarında öğrenim gören öğrenciler örneği üzerinden incelenmiş; öğrencilerin çalışma koşullarını somut biçimde gözlemlemek ve bu kapsamda ortaya çıkan olumsuzlukları tespit etmek amaçlanmıştır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Mesleki eğitim, MESEM, çalışma koşulları, ucuz işgücü, işçi sağlığı ve güvenliği.

\* Asst. Prof. Dr., Mersin University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Mersin-Turkey, ORCID: 0000-0002-7882-4507, e-mail: aytul.demirci@mersin.edu.tr

## Introduction

In order to meet Türkiye's demand for a qualified workforce vocational and technical education plays a crucial role in enabling students to identify their interests, aspirations, abilities, and personality traits; to be informed them about different occupations so that they can choose a profession in which they can be both successful and satisfied; and to strengthen the relationship between the education system and working life (Ekşioğlu & Taşpınar, 2019). In this context, the importance of vocational education is indisputable. Türkiye continues its efforts to improve vocational and technical education. Within the framework of the 2023 Education Vision announced by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) in 2018, vocational education was identified as a priority area, and various improvement, strengthening, and transformation initiatives have been implemented accordingly. Taking into account the skill demands of existing labor markets, it has been proposed that the educational capacity of vocational and technical high schools be restructured in accordance with the supply–demand balance between schools and industry (Korber, 2019).

In order to respond to the changing demands of the labor market, the vocational and technical education system has been undergoing a process of restructuring, and the programs and practices of the previous system have been revised accordingly. Within this framework, as of December 2021, the MoNE implemented the Vocational Education Centers (MESEMs) initiative within all Vocational and Technical Anatolian High Schools in order to strengthen vocational education. Among the primary objectives of MESEM are facilitating a faster transition of graduates into working life, providing intensive on-the-job training opportunities, and addressing the shortage of qualified personnel required by the labor market and various industrial sectors by introducing students to real workplace environments. In addition, the program aims to prepare students who are outside the formal education system for social and professional life, ensure their graduation from the secondary education level, and enable them to acquire vocational skills in their chosen occupational fields.

However, MESEMs, which have come to the agenda for these purposes, continue their efforts to meet the need for qualified labor in the labor market by managing the implementation differently. With the “Law No. 6764 on the Amendment of the Decree Law on the Organization and Duties of the Ministry of National Education and Certain Laws and Decree Laws,” published in the Official Gazette dated 09.12.2016 and numbered 29913, amendments were made to the Basic Law of National Education No. 1739 and the Vocational Education Law No. 3308 (Law No. 6764, 2016). Through these amendments, apprenticeship training was included within the scope of formal and compulsory education, and in 2021 MESEMs were affiliated with the General Directorate of Vocational and Technical Education.

With the inclusion of apprenticeship training within the scope of formal and compulsory education, it was aimed to meet the need for apprentices of enterprises, which constitute the fundamental building blocks of the economy, and to enable individuals to learn their professions on the job through the master–apprentice relationship. According to Article 26 of Law No. 1739, secondary education encompasses all general, vocational, and technical education institutions as well as vocational education centers that provide four years of compulsory formal or non-formal education based on primary education. Graduates of these schools and institutions are awarded a diploma according to the characteristics of the program they complete. However, students enrolled in vocational education centers are required to complete the supplementary courses determined by the MoNE in order to obtain a diploma.

The MESEM system has been implemented based on a structure in which students receive theoretical education at school one day a week and practical training in enterprises for four days. There is also a regulation stipulating that 9th, 10th, and 11th grade students attending MESEMs receive at least 30% of the minimum wage, while 12th grade students receive at least half of the minimum wage. For MESEM students, the full amount of these payments is provided to enterprises as a state subsidy. The MESEM system has been developed largely by drawing inspiration from vocational education systems that have long been implemented in European countries and has been introduced in Türkiye within a similar structural framework (Eurydice, 2020). One of the approaches used in vocational and technical education is the full-time education model, in which instructional activities are predominantly conducted in a school-based environment. This system generally begins after the completion of 8–10 years of compulsory basic education. Following the completion of basic education, some young people are directed directly to the labor market, while students with higher levels of academic achievement are provided with the opportunity to continue to higher education. However, this model is considered a costly structure, as it requires the continuous renewal of equipment and technological infrastructure used in educational institutions (TISK, 1997).

Another prominent approach in vocational education is the apprenticeship-based training model. In this model, cooperation exists between public authorities and private sector organizations in the provision of vocational education. In several European Union countries, as well as in the United States and Japan, students can participate in this model after completing compulsory basic education. In this approach, also referred to as the “dual system,” theoretical knowledge is delivered in schools, while practical training aimed at developing vocational skills takes place in workplace

environments. Within this framework, students receive practical training in enterprises on certain days of the week and attend theoretical courses in educational institutions on the remaining days (TISK, 1997).

The implementation of vocational education systems may vary across countries. In countries such as Belgium, Sweden, France, and Italy, the full-time vocational and technical education model is more widely practiced. In contrast, the apprenticeship-based dual system is more dominant in countries such as Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, and Austria. On the other hand, in some countries, including the United States, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, a mixed structure that combines both approaches can be observed in vocational education systems (TISK, 1997).

Among these country examples, Germany has a distinctive structure in terms of its vocational and technical education system when compared with other countries. Although full-time vocational schools exist in Germany, these institutions are not as widespread as the schools where apprenticeship training is conducted. Full-time vocational schools are generally located in medium-sized cities, while students living in smaller settlements usually access these institutions via public transportation. In addition, some vocational schools provide boarding facilities for teachers and instructors. Furthermore, in rural areas, it is also observed that there are boarding vocational schools, particularly designed to enable individuals with disabilities to receive vocational training.

Structurally, vocational schools in Germany generally follow a two-stage educational arrangement. These stages are referred to as “basic training” and “specialization training.” The first stage covers the first year of the training program and may be completed by students either as full-time pre-vocational education or on a part-time basis within the framework of the “dual system.” In Germany, the vocational and technical education system is largely defined by its relationship with the apprenticeship model known as the “dual system.” In this model, the training process is based on an integrated structure consisting of theoretical instruction provided at school and practical training conducted in enterprises (Uçar & Özerbaş, 2013). The vocational and technical education system in Germany is structured around a framework that aims to prepare students for working life from an early age. Within this system, students are directed from approximately the age of 14 into two main areas: pre-employment vocational education and continuing vocational education. Students receiving training in vocational fields are generally evaluated within the scope of “general vocational education” and are directed to the labor market, apprenticeship programs, or vocational and technical education institutions at the secondary education level at a relatively early age (Uçar & Özerbaş, 2013).

Since the education system in Germany has a federal structure, practices may vary somewhat across different states. Nevertheless, in general, orientation toward vocational education takes place after the completion of nine years of compulsory education. Although full-time vocational schools with durations ranging from one to four years exist, these institutions have relatively limited prevalence within the system. The majority of individuals receiving vocational education—approximately 90 percent—are trained within the apprenticeship-based dual system. Vocational schools operating within this framework serve as preparatory institutions for apprenticeship training programs that typically last between two and three and a half years. It is observed that the duration of apprenticeship training is significantly reduced for students graduating from these schools. During the apprenticeship process, individuals under the age of 18 attend theoretical courses at school one day per week in order to support their vocational training (Şimşek, 1999).

Vocational education systems implemented after compulsory education are generally classified into three categories: provider-based (institution-based), work-based, and mixed systems (Uçar & Özerbaş, 2013). This classification is based on the level at which vocational skills are acquired and the educational environment in which these skills are developed. In provider-based systems, the educational process is mainly carried out by educational institutions, and individuals are generally provided with entry-level vocational skills. In work-based systems, the acquisition of vocational skills is largely the responsibility of enterprises and the relevant sector. In mixed systems, theoretical education provided in schools and practical training conducted in workplaces are integrated, aiming to enable students to acquire both theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Within this framework, vocational education systems offer a variety of educational pathways through which students can pursue different learning trajectories.

In other countries, vocational and technical education is generally defined more in terms of its institutional structure. In this context, vocational education programs are considered within the scope of post-school education programs that do not lead to university, or they are evaluated according to the extent to which they limit students’ opportunities to transition to higher education. However, in some European countries such as France, it is observed that a clear distinction is not made between academic, technical, and vocational education fields (Uçar & Özerbaş, 2013).

In Türkiye, as previously mentioned, these centers are discussed and advocated as significant mechanisms for expanding vocational and technical education and for training a qualified workforce. In particular, they are believed to play an important role in increasing the employability of the young population and in training individuals equipped with the skills required by the industrial sector (MEB, 2021). MESEMs are presented as a structure that brings together theoretical education and practical applications, enabling students to receive training both in schools and in enterprises.

Although the MESEM model implemented in Türkiye has been structurally inspired by the dual vocational education system widely practiced in Europe—particularly in Germany—it exhibits several significant differences in terms of implementation and institutional structure (Özdemir, 2011). First, in the German dual system, vocational education is carried out within the framework of institutionalized cooperation among the state, employer organizations, professional chambers, and trade unions. In this system, enterprises not only provide the training environment but also take an active role in the preparation of training programs, the determination of occupational standards, and evaluation processes. In the MESEM system in Türkiye, however, although enterprises are involved in the practical dimension of the training process, the institutional influence of sector representatives in determining occupational standards and designing training programs is not as strong as in Germany. Another difference relates to the social perception of the educational process and the mechanisms used to guide students. In Germany, vocational and technical education is regarded as an important educational pathway in society due to its strong sectoral connections and high employment opportunities. After completing compulsory education, students participate in vocational education programs through structured and conscious guidance processes. In Türkiye, however, vocational education has long been considered an alternative to academic education and often perceived as a secondary option. This perception may lead to the fact that students who enroll in MESEM programs often come from groups that have not achieved success in academic education. Therefore, the motivations for choosing the system differ considerably between the two countries. Another divergence observed in practice emerges in the context of the relationship between education and employment. In the German dual system, students establish strong ties with the enterprises in which they receive training, and the likelihood of being employed by the same enterprise after graduation is relatively high. In this way, the vocational education system is directly linked to the needs of the labor market. In the MESEM framework in Türkiye, although students receive practical training in enterprises, an institutional structure that guarantees permanent employment in the same enterprise after the training period has not yet been fully established. This situation may limit the effectiveness of vocational education in facilitating the transition to the labor market.

Additionally, differences are evident in terms of the organization of the training period and the quality of learning environments. In the German system, students receive theoretical instruction in vocational schools on certain days of the week while attending practical training in enterprises on the remaining days. This process is supported by strict supervision and standardized training programs. Although a similar structure is envisaged in the MESEM model in Türkiye, significant differences may emerge in practice regarding enterprises' training capacity, the qualifications of trainers, and supervision mechanisms.

In Türkiye, the implementation of the education process through MESEMs—which is intended to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required by a specific occupation, and to enable them to gain vocational experience by receiving theoretical instruction at school on certain days of the week and practical training in enterprises on the remaining days (Bolat, 2017)—has largely conflicted with its originally stated objectives. The model, which was designed to facilitate students' smoother transition into the labor market after graduation, has increasingly functioned as a source of low-cost labor for employers. In particular, following the legal amendment in 2021 mandating the implementation of MESEM programs in all vocational high schools, and stipulating that payments to students employed under this scheme, as well as their occupational accident and disease insurance premiums, would be covered by the Unemployment Insurance Fund, an increasing number of children and young people have been sent to workplaces each year as cheap labor under the guise of “vocational training” through the cooperation of the Turkish Employment Agency (İŞKUR), the MoNE, and employers. This situation has been described by policymakers in the field as “a highly attractive mechanism that relieves employers of financial burdens.” Promotional campaigns for the program have also been carried out under slogans such as “Vocational Education Centers are waiting for YOU.”

In the public discourse, the issue has been addressed under the headings of child labor, violation of the right to education, and financial benefits for employers; discussions have increasingly emphasized that the working conditions of students are inadequate and problematic in every respect. The debate has primarily focused on insufficient supervision of practical training processes in enterprises, poor working conditions, and the problems arising when students are treated as child laborers or cheap labor. The concept of child labor refers to adverse situations in which a child's labor is exploited without oversight, their health and safety are endangered, and their right to education is denied (Ilik et al., 1994).

In this context, the literature distinguishes between children gaining work experience under specific conditions and child labor. Activities that contribute to a child's development, do not disrupt their education, and are supportive in terms of social learning are classified as “child work,” whereas activities that adversely affect a child's physical, mental, and social development, harm their education, and involve economic exploitation fall under the scope of child labor (Çöpoğlu, 2018). At this point, the question becomes whether vocational education practices truly provide students with opportunities to gain learning and work experience, or whether they deviate from the fundamental purpose of vocational

education and create conditions that allow children to be used as low-cost labor. In this context, children's absence from educational processes due to work has significant negative consequences at both the individual and societal levels. Limited access to education weakens their intellectual development and potential contribution to social welfare. Moreover, assigning children to heavy and hazardous work during their developmental stage can have far more serious consequences than for adults. When children work under the same risky conditions as adults, they suffer greater physical and physiological harm, and these adverse effects can persist into adulthood (International Labour Organization [ILO], 1996). The primary reason for this vulnerability is that children are still in developmental stages and possess psychological and physiological characteristics that differ from those of adults.

Although the MESEM model is designed to allow students to receive practical training in enterprises alongside their educational processes, some studies indicate that this system creates conditions in which child and youth labor is utilized as low-cost and unprotected work. In particular, the fact that students spend the majority of the week in enterprises, are directly involved in production processes, and receive wages largely covered by the state results in the creation of low-cost labor from the perspective of employers. It is evident that students within the MESEM program are positioned as "cheap labor" and that their working conditions constitute a controversial area in terms of social security, occupational safety, and the quality of education.

The primary purpose of vocational education should be to enable students to acquire professional skills and to participate in the labor market as qualified individuals. However, in practice, when educational activities take a secondary role within production processes and students are primarily treated as labor, this model evidently carries the risk of using child labor in an unprotected and low-cost manner. It is therefore of critical importance that the MESEM system be structured in a way that safeguards children's right to education, supports their developmental processes, and ensures safe working conditions.

Vocational high schools serve a dual purpose: they provide students with a high school diploma that enables their integration into society, and they equip individuals with vocational knowledge and skills in occupational fields of their own choosing. Given the ongoing transformations and the role of MESEMs as the intermediary institutions in this process, careful attention to these centers is required. MESEMs should be regarded by decision-makers as institutions with significant problematic dimensions, warranting critical reflection and consideration for regulation as a matter of public policy.

MESEM, as part of vocational and technical education and falling within the scope of formal and compulsory education, was incorporated into the formal education system in 2016. In 2021, amendments to Law No. 3308 transformed it into a four-year high school program. Students receive theoretical instruction at school one day per week and practical training under a master in enterprises for four days a week. The educational process is implemented through programs offered in 39 fields and 193 occupations. MESEM programs are carried out both independently and within the framework of Vocational and Technical Anatolian High Schools.

Within this framework, students who complete the 11th grade are awarded a journeyman certificate, and those who successfully pass the skills examination at the end of the 12th grade are entitled to a master certificate. Additionally, students who complete the supplementary courses determined by the MoNE receive a high school diploma. MoNE defines MESEM as a type of educational program that provides students with the pathway to obtain a journeyman certificate, master certificate, master instructor certificate, and a vocational high school diploma (MEB, 2025). The program consists of a "Specialization Training" process that begins in the 9th grade and continues through the 12th grade. At each grade level (9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th), students receive specialization training, and a diploma is awarded at the end of the program.

Certain conditions must be met in order to apply to MESEMs. First, the candidate must have at least graduated from a secondary school or an Imam Hatip secondary school. In addition, the candidate's health must meet the requirements of the chosen vocational field, which should be documented with a report from an official health institution if necessary. In terms of age, the candidate must have completed 14 years by the start of the program. Finally, a signed apprenticeship contract with a workplace operating in the relevant vocational field is required, and the workplace must have a qualified master holding a "Master Instructor Certificate" (MEB, 2025).

MESEMs, which operate under this structure and set of conditions, have been incorporated into the education system as institutions providing complementary education (Sallangül, 2025). The primary questions for discussion are: do these institutions enable students to acquire skills in workplaces, or do they primarily transform students into low-cost labor for the industry? A related question is what the working conditions are like for students employed within this system. This study was conducted to address these questions and to identify the challenges faced by students in MESEMs, whose educational experience largely takes place in enterprises.

With the ongoing sectoral, technological, and scientific developments worldwide, expectations for vocational and technical education are also increasing. As an important policy instrument aimed at responding to the dynamic needs of the labor market under current conditions, MESEMs are the focus of this study, particularly regarding their rationale for existence and the working conditions they create, as previously noted. Within this general framework, the study aims to reveal the operational mechanisms of MESEM programs and to examine the working conditions experienced by students under this system, specifically in the province of Mersin.

For students, the outcomes—both actual and potential—arising from participation in MESEM programs, as well as the challenges encountered, will help illuminate the real intentions behind the implementation of the system. The limited number of studies on MESEM programs and the insufficiency of research examining student working conditions in the literature have served as a motivating factor for conducting this study.

### **Method**

This section describes the research model, population and sample, data collection procedures, instruments used, and the methods employed for data analysis.

#### **Research Model**

A literature review was first conducted on the MESEM program and the situation and working conditions of students employed within this system. The purpose of the literature review was to gain a better understanding of the research topic and to access accurate data. Following the literature review, a field study was conducted using a qualitative research method.

The reason for choosing the qualitative research method is that it helps determine the overall approach of the study and ensures that the various stages of the research are conducted consistently with this approach. It also assists the researcher in following a systematic process during data collection and analysis. Interviews and observations are commonly used data collection techniques in qualitative research. By examining social events and phenomena in their natural settings, qualitative research enables a realistic and holistic perspective (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018).

#### **Study Group and Research Process**

To investigate the working conditions of students employed within the MESEM program in detail, semi-structured questionnaires were prepared as a qualitative data collection tool, and interviews were conducted. During the interviews, not only the students' verbal responses but also their nonverbal behaviors- such as body language, tone of voice, and interaction patterns- were systematically observed. These observations contributed to interpreting the students' statements within context and enhanced the reliability of the data. The study population consisted of students employed under the MESEM program in the province of Mersin. In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 students using the semi-structured questionnaire framework, employing a case study design. A case study is a method in which a single situation or event is examined in depth, data are collected systematically, and what occurs in the real setting is observed (Creswell, 2018).

Although the total number of students employed under the MESEM program is much higher, the sample size was determined based on the general principle in qualitative research that data collection reaches saturation when no new information emerges. In qualitative research, saturation is a critical consideration due to the difficulties in determining sample size and the absence of a numerical calculation formula. Data collection is therefore concluded when no new information can be obtained. While it is generally accepted that interviewing 15 participants is sufficient for qualitative studies, this research planned to conduct interviews with 20 students randomly selected from different schools, and the sample size was determined accordingly. Semi-structured questionnaires were used during the interviews. Students attending different schools and working under the MESEM program participated on a completely voluntary basis. Depending on the interview context and the responses provided, additional probing questions were used to obtain data that allowed for in-depth analysis. Lodico et al. (2010) note that in interviews conducted using semi-structured questionnaires, it is possible to adapt the questions during the interview, including adding or removing questions as necessary. The field study began on May 10, 2025, and was completed on June 1, 2025. The collected data were analyzed descriptively. Ethical principles were strictly followed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, participated on a voluntary basis, and were assured that their personal information would remain confidential. The study was conducted with the approval of the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee at Mersin University.

While the primary aim of the in-depth interviews conducted for data collection was to identify the working conditions and challenges faced by students, the study also sought to understand their experiences, thoughts, and emotions. Additionally, at the stage of concluding the study, it became necessary to consult with Coordinator Teachers (CTs) who

directly observe and guide the students throughout this process in order to reflect all aspects of vocational education. The inclusion of CT perspectives was preferred to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. In this context, interviews were conducted with four volunteer CTs working at different schools who agreed to participate in the study.

### Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis and content analysis methods were employed to analyze the data. The purpose of descriptive analysis was to summarize, organize and highlight the key characteristics of the collected data. Content analysis, on the other hand, aimed to systematically identify the themes, concepts, relationships, and patterns of meaning within the qualitative data obtained during the interviews. The focus was on the participating students' own perspectives, meanings, and lived experiences.

Initially, the interview notes were transcribed verbatim into a computer. The data were then classified in accordance with the study's objectives, thematized, tabulated, and interpreted. The resulting findings were presented through descriptive narration, reflecting the participants' statements as they were conveyed during the interviews.

### Findings

This section presents the findings obtained from the analysis of the data collected through interview notes with the participating students and both systematic and unsystematic observation.

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the number of students enrolled in MESEMs. According to a 2025 announcement by the MoNE, the total number of students registered in MESEMs reached 764,145. In contrast, the 2025 Education Monitoring Report published by the Education Reform Initiative (ERG) indicates that during the 2024–2025 academic year, the number of students aged 15–18 attending MESEMs was 392,887 (Ünker, 2025). The discrepancy between these figures is largely attributed to differences in coverage: the Ministry's data include all students registered in the system, while the report focuses solely on a specific age group. Additionally, recent economic conditions, academic selection mechanisms within the education system, and reforms in vocational education policies have been key factors contributing to the increasing enrollment in MESEMs. This trend demonstrates that MESEMs are becoming increasingly central in Turkey's secondary education system, particularly in the context of vocational guidance and early labor market participation.

The rapid rise in MESEM enrollment has, as previously noted, brought discussions of child labor to the forefront. Because the MESEM model involves students spending the majority of their week in workplaces and actively participating in production processes, it has been debated in the context of institutionalized child labor. Specifically, the fact that students aged 15–18 spend a significant portion of their educational time in work environments can blur the boundaries between education and labor. While this arrangement is defended as a means of developing vocational skills and facilitating transition into employment, it also raises concerns regarding students' right to education, developmental processes, and working conditions. Consequently, the increase in student numbers at MESEMs necessitates a multidimensional evaluation of the relationship between vocational education policies and child labor.

Among students employed under the MESEM program, 1,348 cases of occupational accidents have been reported (Nasuhbeyoğlu, 2025). Although official data indicate that 10 children have lost their lives to date, the 2025 data from the Occupational Health and Safety Assembly report that this number has risen to 17. Discussions on various platforms suggest that the actual number of fatalities may be significantly higher than what is officially reported. These data indicate that the working conditions for children within the MESEM program involve serious risks and that safety measures are inadequate. Qualitative findings further reveal that students' decisions to work are largely shaped by structural factors such as economic necessity, family influence, and school guidance. Consequently, both quantitative and qualitative evidence underscores the need to strengthen safety and monitoring mechanisms in vocational education programs and highlights the necessity of carefully addressing the tension between early workforce participation and the right to education.

### Socio-demographic Findings of Students Within the Scope of MESEM

Of the 20 students from central and district schools in Mersin province who participated in the interviews, 6 were female and 14 were male. In interviews conducted with CTs in Mersin specifically, it was stated that male students constitute the predominant structure in MESEMs.

**Table 1.**

*Demographic and Employment Information of MESEM Students*

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Training Program	Workplace
G1	Female	16	Beauty and Hair Care Services	Hair Salon

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Training Program	Workplace
G2	Female	15	Beauty and Hair Care Services	Beauty Center
G3	Female	15	Food and Beverage Services	Restaurant
G4	Female	16	Food Technology	Restaurant
G5	Female	14	Beauty and Hair Care Services	Hair Salon
G6	Male	17	Machine Technology	Industry
G7	Male	18	Automotive Painting	Industry-Auto Body Shop
G8	Male	16	Motor Vehicles Technology	Industry-Auto Body Shop
G9	Male	17	Electrical-Electronics	Electrician
G10	Male	15	Barber	Barber Shop
G11	Male	16	Food and Beverage Services	Café
G12	Male	15	Electrical-Electronics	Industry
G13	Male	15	Motor Vehicles Technology	Industry
G14	Female	16	Beauty and Hair Care Services	Hair Salon
G15	Male	17	Food and Beverage Services	Hotel
G16	Male	16	Automotive Mechanics	Industry
G17	Male	15	Motor Vehicles LPG Systems Maintenance and Repair	Industry
G18	Male	16	Air Conditioning	Industry
G19	Male	17	Metal Surface Painting	Auto Body Shop
G20	Male	16	Automotive	Industry

### General Information

In order to understand the work motivations of students employed within the scope of MESEM and their reasons for participating in this process, the data obtained based on their responses to the question “Are you working of your own volition?” are as follows:

**Table 2.**  
*Voluntariness Status of MESEM Students Regarding Employment*

Data	Students Participating in the Interview
I am working of my own volition	G1, G12
My family directed me	G2, G3, G5, G7, G11, G12, G15
The school directed me	G4, G2, G7
I started because I felt it was compulsory	G6
I am working for economic reasons	G1, G2, G3, G4, G5, G7, G8, G10, G11, G12, G13, G14, G15, G16, G18, G20
I started to learn the profession	G1, G12, G19
I started to acquire a profession because I will not be able to attend university	G6, G9, G12, G13, G17, G20

As observed in Table 2, some students provided different answers to the same question during the same interview. In qualitative research, such situations are often interpreted as “internal inconsistencies in responses,” “multiple motivations,” “implicit obligations,” or “tensions between subjective perceptions and structural conditions.” Rather than being considered an error that undermines reliability, this can be understood as reflecting the complexity of participants’ experiences. For example, some students indicated during the same interview that they chose to work “of their own free will,” while simultaneously stating that they began working to gain a profession because they believed they would not be able to continue to university. This demonstrates that students’ decisions to work are not solely based on individual preferences but are also shaped by structural factors such as educational opportunities, family guidance, and economic conditions. Therefore, the variation in students’ responses should be interpreted not as inconsistency but as an insight

into the transitional and multilayered decision-making processes that exist between voluntary choice and structural obligation.

Again, as shown in Table 2, a significant portion of students began working not out of their own volition but due to various obligations. Economic reasons, in particular, were among the most frequently cited factors driving early workforce participation. Additionally, some students stated that they chose to work because they believed they would not be able to pursue a university education due to academic difficulties at school or financial constraints. In contrast, the number of students participating in MESEM purely out of personal interest or motivation to acquire a profession was observed to be limited.

Students who responded, *“I am working of my own volition,”* expressed their views as follows: *“I started in order to gain experience and learn the profession”* (G1). *“It felt easier to work while studying to earn money”* (G12). *“I joined this program to improve myself in this profession and to earn money”* (G19).

Some of the students who were directed by their families stated: *“Thanks to my father—he said you will earn money, so here I am”* (G3). *“My mother and father wanted it so I could reduce my family’s financial burden”* (G7). *“My father said you can’t study, at least go learn a trade”* (G11). *“They directed me so that I would take responsibility”* (G15). *“Some relatives had gone; they were satisfied, so they sent me too”* (G11). The responses of the three students directed by the school were as follows: *“When I spoke with the school counselor, I said I don’t like studying, and they recommended MESEM to me”* (G4). *“My vocational teacher said you have an aptitude for this profession—go gain experience”* (G2). *“Because I was unsuccessful in my courses, I transferred to MESEM upon my teachers’ recommendation”* (G7).

One student who stated, *“I enrolled in MESEM because it felt compulsory”* (G6), explained: *“Many people around me—especially those who are unsuccessful in their classes—are enrolled here, so I enrolled too.”* With this response, the student effectively articulated not only their own reason for participation but also that of many peers.

The number of students working within the MESEM framework due to economic reasons is highly salient. Sixteen of the 20 interviewed students stated in a consistent manner that *“their financial situation is insufficient and they work to contribute to their family”*: *“Because we are poor, my father couldn’t give me pocket money, so I work within the scope of MESEM”* (G13). *“Only my father works regularly; he is a construction worker. My mother sometimes goes to cleaning jobs, and our home is rented, so I have to work”* (G18). *“My mother is ill and I live with my three siblings; our relatives help us. I’m in MESEM because I have to earn money”* (G20).

Students who indicated that they transferred to MESEM in order to learn a profession expressed their thoughts as follows: *“It is very difficult to find a job now; I want to learn the work quickly and run my own business”* (G1). *“I want to apply what I learn at school while working”* (G12). *“I think employers now hire people with experience, so I preferred it”* (G19).

Some of the students who believed they would not be able to attend university expressed their views in the following way: *“I don’t like studying; at this rate I won’t get into anywhere, so it seems best to be here”* (G6). *“Even if I got into somewhere, my family couldn’t afford to support my education”* (G12). *“I can’t leave my mother and siblings and go somewhere to study, so I have to work”* (G20).

When students were asked about transportation and meal opportunities at workplaces, five stated that they did not have problems with transportation because a shuttle service was provided, whereas 15 reported that there was no shuttle, that they used public transportation, and that this was both time-consuming and costly. Regarding this problem, (G18) explained: *“Because the place I work is in a distant area, I wake up very early in the morning and go to work by changing two vehicles. I get tired, and a significant part of the money I earn goes to transportation.”* In terms of meals, most students reported that they addressed the issue by bringing food from home; those who ate at the workplace stated that the cost was deducted from their wages. When asked how much time they spent commuting to and from work, students indicated that it varied depending on traffic and distance, but that it was approximately between 20 minutes and 2 hours. They noted that a route that took 45 minutes in the morning could take up to 2 hours in the evening due to peak-hour congestion; they also reported that waiting times could sometimes be long because services were infrequent. Those who used shuttle services stated that they did not lose much time on the road.

### **Working Conditions**

The responses provided by students working in enterprises within the scope of MESEM to questions about the working conditions they are exposed to offer detailed information ranging from the physical work environment to daily workload, leave entitlements, workplace health and safety, and wages. The findings clearly reveal both the position of students within working life under MESEM and how the education–employment relationship is shaped in practice.

Responses to the question “How do you evaluate your working environment?” point to significant problems across multiple dimensions. Students stated that their physical environments are cramped, crowded, and very noisy; they also identified generally inadequate hygiene conditions—often noting that they themselves are expected to deal with cleanliness—as a problem. As one student put it: *“Our hygiene conditions are inadequate, especially the shared-use areas are more problematic. Usually, in the time left over from the work we do, they also make us clean these places, so since there isn’t time, it’s also a bit...”* (G13). Regarding breaks, the common response among the interviewed students was: *“Usually they are given, but if there is heavy workload, we are asked to keep them short.”* The interviews indicate that break and rest periods are shaped by workload intensity. When asked whether the equipment they use at the workplace is safe, students reported that although the equipment varies by sector, it is largely insufficient; they also emphasized that it is old and poorly maintained. Students working in the industrial sector, in particular, stated that they “find it risky in terms of safety.”

When students were asked whether their working conditions differed from those of adult workers at the same workplace, they generally reported that they worked under riskier, longer, lower-paid, and less supervised conditions. The issues were particularly evident in terms of working hours and overtime, wage levels and social benefits, as well as occupational health and safety risks. For example, one student stated: *“Most of the time, I work 12–16 hours a day. The older workers leave before me because outside of work, I also clean up the area... Actually, the hours don’t matter; I go home whenever the work is finished, and we usually work long hours without receiving overtime pay”* (G6). Students employed in industrial, metal, furniture, automotive, maintenance, and construction sectors were observed to face especially hazardous conditions. The risks present for adult workers in these sectors are compounded for students due to their age and inexperience. Illustrative statements include: *“When welding, I get burned from molten metal, and it really hurts”* (G12); *“A friend of mine died from electric shock, so I work very cautiously”* (G9); *“We carry very heavy materials, and I fall once or twice every day”* (G13); *“Flying materials from the machines injure our hands and faces”* (G18); *“We do all the hard work, but we earn less than the adults”* (G7); and *“They take proper breaks in the same environment, but most of the time we finish the day without a break”* (G8). These responses highlight the students’ disadvantaged position due to their age. In addition, one student reported experiencing psychological exclusion at the workplace: *“...Because we are students, they say we need to learn the job, so I am made to work more. But our opinions are not valued; we are constantly belittled”* (G13). When asked whether they felt physically and psychologically safe at work, the same student responded: *“The machines are difficult and dangerous; we are both scared and unsure how to operate them. I learned over time, but I experienced minor accidents. Even then, I was scolded for being careless”* (G13). Another student stated: *“Physically, it’s not too dangerous, but some workers behave very harshly; they yell constantly”* (G16). Observations conducted during workplace visits confirmed that students often performed their tasks cautiously and with evident apprehension.

Regarding questions about leave entitlements, most students reported that they were able to take one day off per week, while some stated that they never took any leave, and others indicated that the day they attended school was considered a day off by their employers. Students working in the food and beverage sector (G3, G4, G11) reported that they had not taken leave for months. A student working in a hotel (G15) remarked, *“Leave? There’s no such thing; I can’t even sit down on special days”*, while another student (G2) stated, *“Legally, we are off on the days the shop is closed”*, highlighting the difficulties they face regarding leave. Students (G2, G4, G5, G14, G6) also mentioned that the days they attend school are their only rest days, effectively summarizing their working conditions. When students were asked how they spent their leave days, one 16-year-old student (G8) replied: *“I just want to sleep; I don’t even feel like eating. Even with the noise at home, I sleep continuously”*. This response reflects not only extreme fatigue but also a significant loss of energy and diminished enjoyment of life. Considering their socio-economic conditions, this can be interpreted as burnout resulting from the workload and responsibilities. Another student (G12) emphasized the deprivation of a fundamental childhood right—the right to play—and developmental need: *“...I would like to play with my friends, but on that day, I can only do school assignments. I wish they wouldn’t give us homework or exams, especially since I’m already working in the industry and most of what we learn won’t be useful”*. This statement illustrates how the current education system fails to achieve its intended purpose. Additionally, students expressed fear that requesting or taking leave could result in dismissal by the employer.

Wages of students within the MESEM framework vary by age and by sector. Although Article 25 of Law No. 3308 sets a minimum threshold for wages to be paid to students receiving vocational training and to students doing internships in vocational and technical secondary education institutions, differences emerge in practice. According to the Law, *“enterprises employing 20 or more workers must pay students at least 30% of the net minimum wage; enterprises with fewer than 20 employees must pay at least 15%”*. However, in practice, this provision often does not find its counterpart for many enterprises. Based on information obtained from students during the period of the research, wages were observed to range between 6,000 and 11,000 TL. Students also stated that even when payments are made, they are often not regular. They reported being aware that the state deposits money into the accounts of the enterprises where they

work on their behalf, yet claimed that some enterprises do not even make these payments. (G5) stated that, although not in their own case, a friend working in the same sector worked very long hours but the workplace owner did not pay wages, occasionally gave pocket money, and threatened that if the student complained they would not be able to find work in the sector.

Despite the numerous challenges faced by students within the MESEM framework, the most prominent issue identified is Occupational Health and Safety (OHS). It is evident that students are employed in physically demanding and hazardous work relative to their age. Considering the physiological and cognitive development levels of these students, their potential exposure to occupational accidents and work-related illnesses is significantly higher. Given that their risk perception is also lower due to their age, the implementation of effective occupational health and safety measures, as well as monitoring mechanisms, is of vital importance. In this context, students were first asked whether they had received training on occupational health and safety. Among the 20 students interviewed, 12 reported that they had not received any training; 5 stated that their CTs had merely warned them to be careful; and 3 indicated that their employer had explained on the first day how to use equipment safely. Although the risks faced by students encompass both physical and psychosocial dimensions, the study clearly shows that these risks are largely disregarded within OHS frameworks, and preventive and protective mechanisms are not systematically implemented. When asked whether they had experienced a workplace accident, almost all students reported having had minor accidents but lacked awareness to classify these incidents as occupational accidents. Their understanding of what constitutes a workplace accident was insufficient. For example, a student working in a hairdressing salon (G5) initially responded “No, I haven’t experienced any” when asked if they had had an accident, but continued in the interview: “...but my hands often get burned on the hairdryer or curling iron”. Similarly, another student (G8) attributed a finger injury to their own carelessness. These examples highlight the students’ lack of awareness regarding occupational health and safety. Based on interviews with students across different sectors, the risks they face in terms of OHS can be summarized as follows:

Students working in the *Hairdressing and Beauty Services* field are predominantly exposed to chemical hazards. Regular exposure to vapors from chemicals such as ammonia and other solvents used in hair dyeing, perming, and hair straightening procedures increases the risk of respiratory problems. Prolonged standing leads to musculoskeletal pain and discomfort at an early age, as well as chronic fatigue. In addition, the use of sharp tools (such as manicure instruments, scissors, razors, and blades) combined with inadequate sterilization practices exposes students to bloodborne diseases, including Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, and HIV. These risks constitute the most frequently encountered occupational hazards for students in this sector.

In Skin Care and Aesthetic Services—another work area related to this sector—the risks voiced by interviewees, particularly female students, become prominent as general problems arising from non-sterile conditions and permanent skin burns resulting from incorrect use of laser and radiofrequency devices.

The risk perceptions related to OHS among participating students working in hairdressing and beauty services were synthesized into five categories based on their responses and are compiled in Table 3.

**Table 3.**

*OHS Risk Perceptions of MESEM Students Working in Hairdressing and Beauty Services*

Risk Category	Risks and Explanations
Physical Risks	Electric shock: Arising from electrical devices such as hair dryers and straighteners. Cuts: Resulting from working with sharp tools such as scissors, razors, and blades. Burns: Resulting from hot water, excessive heat from hair dryers, and the use of curling irons.
Chemical Risks	Skin irritation and inhalation-related allergies: Resulting from contact with or inhalation of hair dyes, bleaching agents, disinfectants, and other chemical products.
Biological Risks	Blood-borne diseases: Risk of transmission of diseases such as Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, and HIV through cuts caused by razors or blades. Fungal and bacterial infections: Risks arising from inadequately sterilized tools such as combs, brushes, and scissors, and from shared towels that are not properly disinfected.
Ergonomic Risks	Musculoskeletal pain: Back, neck, leg, and foot pain caused by standing all day and repeatedly performing the same tasks.
Psychosocial Risks	Intense work stress: Difficulties created by consecutive customers, having to work under time pressure, and physical fatigue. Pressure to ensure customer satisfaction: Stress arising from the obligation to fully meet customer expectations and achieve customer satisfaction with the outcome.

Source: The table was created by the author based on the classification of statements provided by the participating students.

Students working in the *Restaurant and Café Services* field are exposed to multidimensional risks due to the dynamic and high-paced nature of their working environment. Among the primary physical risks in this area are contact with high-temperature surfaces and liquids, as well as incidents of slipping, tripping, and falling on wet and greasy floors. Following these problems, the use of sharp and piercing tools in the kitchen constitutes another major risk factor. This field is also psychologically demanding: the intense pace of work, stress arising from customer complaints, and long working hours—particularly the obligation to work in the evenings and on weekends—pose significant risks in terms of OHS.

The OHS risk perceptions of participating students working in restaurant and café services were synthesized into five categories based on their responses and are compiled in Table 4.

**Table 4.**

*OHS Risk Perceptions of MESEM Students Working in Restaurant and Café Services*

Risk Category	Risks and Explanations
Physical Risks	Slips, trips, and falls: Caused by wet and slippery floors contaminated with oil, water, or food residues. Cuts: Caused by the use of sharp kitchen tools such as knives, graters, and slicers. Burns: Caused by hot stoves, ovens, grill surfaces, splashing oil, and boiling water. Electric shock: Caused by the absence of grounded outlets and electrical faults in kitchen equipment (e.g., mixers, deep fryers).
Chemical Risks	Exposure to irritant chemicals: Risk of skin contact with and inhalation of degreasers, disinfectants, and oven cleaners used for heavy cleaning. Respiratory harm: Risk of inhaling dense cooking smoke, steam, and burnt-oil fumes in poorly ventilated kitchens.
Biological Risks	Foodborne poisoning: Caused by foods stored or prepared at inappropriate temperatures, potentially leading to bacterial contamination. Risks due to inadequate hygiene: Illnesses arising from non-compliance with personnel hygiene rules (e.g., handwashing), cross-contamination (raw meat-vegetables), or the presence of pests.
Ergonomic Risks	Heavy lifting and carrying: Risk of injury when lifting heavy boxes, gas cylinders, or large pots during the transport of kitchen materials. Prolonged standing/posture: Back, neck, and leg pain caused by standing throughout work or working in bent postures (at counters). Repetitive movements: Muscle fatigue caused by continually performing similar actions such as chopping, stirring, and packaging.
Psychosocial Risks	High-paced work stress: Pressure to keep up with orders and prepare items quickly and without errors, especially during peak hours. Difficult customer interactions: The obligation to cope with complaints. Long and irregular working hours: Negative effects on social life due to working evenings, weekends, and public holidays.

Source: The table was created by the author based on the classification of statements provided by the participating students.

The *Electrical–Electronics Services* field entails a high level of potentially fatal risk for students working within the scope of MESEM. Students themselves identified electric shock as the most serious risk, arising from situations such as insufficient insulation, faulty grounding, or working on live electrical installations. The occurrence of burns, along with exposure to electronic waste and chemical substances, also leads to significant health problems. For example, a student working in this field (G12) stated that they developed a respiratory illness due to exposure to lead fumes generated during soldering work.

Based on the responses of participating students working in the electrical–electronics field, their OHS risk perceptions were synthesized into five categories and are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5.**

*OHS Risk Perceptions of MESEM Students Working in Electrical–Electronics Services*

Risk Category	Risks and Explanations
Physical Risks	Electric shock: Arising while working on live lines, due to insulation failures in equipment, or interventions carried out under inappropriate conditions. Burns: Resulting from electrical arcs or soldering processes. Cuts and punctures: Caused by stripping cables, sharp-edged electronic boards, or the use of hand tools. Fire and explosion risk: Caused by overheating of batteries/accumulators due to short circuits, overloading, or incorrect connections.
Chemical Risks	Frequent exposure to solder fumes: Fumes released during tin–lead or lead-free soldering. Solvent and chemical vapors: Inhalation of vapors from cleaners, adhesives, and varnishes. Heavy metals: Exposure to dust or vapors of metals, especially lead and mercury.

Risk Category	Risks and Explanations
Biological Risks	Dirty/dusty old equipment: Allergic reactions or dust-related respiratory disorders arising while working with such equipment.
Ergonomic Risks	Prolonged static and bent postures: Neck, lower back, shoulder, and back pain resulting from working while focusing on components at desks, benches, or in confined spaces. Eye strain: Tasks requiring prolonged intense focus on small parts. Repetitive movements: Strain on hands and wrists from repetitive actions such as continuous soldering or tightening screws.
Psychosocial Risks	High attention and precision stress: Pressure associated with working on critical systems where mistakes can be costly. Fear of electric shock: Psychological tension created by working continuously in high-risk environments. Technical complexity and constant learning pressure: The obligation to keep up with evolving technologies and to learn new systems.

Source: The table was created by the author based on the classification of statements provided by the participating students.

*The Motor Vehicles and Automotive* field constitutes an environment in which heavy physical working conditions and toxic substances coexist, posing significant risks for students. Among physical risks, the most critical one identified by students is the risk of being trapped or crushed while working underneath a vehicle lifted by a jack. In terms of chemical risks, exposure to carbon monoxide in exhaust gases, battery acid, engine oils, and benzene gives rise to chronic health problems. Moreover, as stated by (G13): *“Because I carry heavy transmission or engine parts, my back and spine started to hurt. I went to the doctor and was told that I have a slipped disc. They said it’s dangerous, but I’m still working...”* When asked what their family and employer said about this situation, the response was: *“They said, ‘If this is your job, you’ll get used to it; things like this happen—don’t worry, nothing will happen.’”* This response, in effect, reflects the prevailing situation experienced by many students.

Similarly, due to the extensive use of vibrating equipment, another student working in this field (G17) stated that they were diagnosed with white finger syndrome: *“At first we didn’t understand what it was; my employer said it would pass, but it didn’t. Because the appearance was disturbing, my teacher told me to have it checked, so I went to the doctor and was diagnosed.”*

Based on the responses of participating students working in the Motor Vehicles and Automotive field, their OHS risk perceptions were synthesized into five categories and are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6.**

*OHS Risk Perceptions of MESEM Students Working in the Motor Vehicles and Automotive Services Field*

Risk Category	Risks and Explanations
Physical Risks	Entrapment, crushing, and impact: Risks arising while working under a vehicle due to slipping of a jack or stand, falling of heavy parts (engine, transmission), or uncontrolled closing of heavy panels such as the hood. Cuts and punctures: Injuries caused by sharp-edged metal parts, broken glass, loose wires, and hand tools. Burns: Resulting from contact with hot engine blocks, exhaust systems, brake discs, welding sparks, or hot liquids (radiator water, oil). Falls: Loss of balance while working on vehicles (bodywork) or on elevated platforms.
Chemical Risks	Exhaust gases (carbon monoxide): Exposure to toxic gases from running engines in enclosed or poorly ventilated areas. Oils and solvents: Skin contact with or inhalation of vapors from engine oil, grease, brake fluid, battery acid, and solvents such as thinner. Particles and dust: Inhalation of asbestos/dust, tire dust, and rust/residue particles.
Biological Risks	Risk of infection: Risk of infections such as tetanus from cuts or abrasions involving dirty, rusty, or oily parts. Bacteria/fungi: Skin infections that may arise from prolonged presence in damp, poorly ventilated, and dirty working environments.
Ergonomic Risks	Heavy physical load: Manual carrying and lifting of heavy components such as engines, transmissions, differentials, and rims. Strenuous body postures: Prolonged bending, stretching under vehicles, and working in confined spaces in awkward positions. Hand–arm vibration: “White finger” syndrome caused by prolonged use of vibrating hand tools.
Psychosocial Risks	Time and customer pressure: Stress associated with meeting deadlines, satisfying customer expectations, and handling urgent service requests. Noise stress: Tension and concentration difficulties caused by high-noise environments such as compressors, hammers, grinders, and engine testing.

Source: The table was created by the author based on the classification of statements provided by the participating students.

According to the summary tables developed based on interviews with students, CTs, and the observations conducted, it is evident that while each sector involves distinct risks specific to its working environment, they also share several common risks. Within the scope of physical risks, electric shock, cuts, and burns emerge as core risks observed in nearly all sectors. Chemical risks appear in varying forms—from hair dyes to solder fumes, from cleaning products to exhaust gases—and are reported to cause respiratory irritation and allergies among students. Biological risks were identified particularly through blood-borne diseases and infections linked to inadequate hygiene, becoming especially salient in sectors where cuts are likely to occur. Ergonomic difficulties constitute a defining problem in almost every occupation: prolonged standing, bending, heavy lifting, and repetitive movements are the main causes of musculoskeletal disorders. In addition, working students across all of these sectors face a shared psychosocial risk arising from pressure to ensure customer satisfaction, time stress, and an intense work pace. Exposure to these risks at an early age becomes a key determinant of serious health problems that may shape their future.

In summary, for MESEM students working in these broad risk environments, the fundamental OHS-related problems include: entering working life without receiving sufficient theoretical and practical training on OHS while “learning the job”; the fact that, due to their age, their capacities to recognize physical risks, anticipate hazardous situations, and take precautions are not yet fully developed; employers’ or master trainers’ failure to fulfill supervisory functions; and the lack of appropriate personal protective equipment for students or the absence of established usage habits in workplaces.

When students were asked whom they contact regarding the main problems they experience within this framework, some stated that they remain silent; others said they speak with the employer or their masters; and some reported sharing the issue with their CTs, yet noted that the outcome does not change. When asked whether they talk to their families, (G19)’s response—“*What would the family say? We need money... don’t get yourself fired*”—clearly reveals the burden placed on students. Only two students stated that after reporting a problem, their CT began to visit their workplace more frequently. At this point, based on the view that the perspectives of CTs—who monitor students’ educational processes and provide communication between the enterprise and the school—would be important, interviews were conducted with them as well. In these interviews, no prepared question form was used; they were only asked how they evaluate the MESEM implementation, and they were also asked to describe their observations from workplace visits.

Of the CTs who participated in the interviews, two were female and two were male.

**Table 7.**

*Descriptive Information on CTs*

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Field	Years of Service	School Assigned	Years as Coordinator	Average Weekly Workplace Visits
CT1	Female	35	Electrical– Electronics	12	Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School	3	8
CT2	Female	42	Beauty	18	MESEM	6	10
CT3	Male	39	Motor Vehicles Technology	15	MESEM	5	9
CT4	Male	29	Food Technology	7	MESEM	3	12

CTs are assigned duties such as placing students in enterprises, monitoring the training plan, conducting workplace visits, communicating with enterprises in all circumstances, preparing MESEM documentation, and evaluating student achievement. In this context, nearly all CTs—who are responsible for ensuring that the student’s process in the enterprise is conducted in a healthy manner and in compliance with rules—emphasized heavy workload and OHS deficiencies in the interviews. CTs who conduct monitoring visits stated that students are assigned tasks in enterprises that do not align with the educational purpose. They shared their general views as follows: First, all noted that if the MESEM implementation were carried out in accordance with its purpose, it would be a beneficial arrangement for students’ vocational development. As (CT4) stated: “*The MESEM implementation is beneficial. Observing the process of applying theoretical knowledge learned at school in the field is very useful... it is an important tool for establishing the connection between the education they receive and real life... we think it is important in terms of gaining work discipline and becoming acquainted with employment opportunities.*” However, CTs continued by emphasizing that these views have no real counterpart in the field. They stated that the quality of education is pushed into the background and students are used merely as auxiliary labor: “*When we go for monitoring, we see that many students are used only as labor. They either do cleaning*

or serve tea and coffee” (CT1). “...We can easily identify these situations during our visits and intervene, but we do not know what happens outside of the visit periods” (CT1). “...Of course, in such cases, the fact that we have no sanctioning power over enterprises is one of the main problems” (CT4). “When students complain about working hours, leave, and working conditions, we only talk to their masters. Does the situation change? No...” (CT3). “In some workplaces, working hours reach 10–11 hours. In fact, when we look sectorally, many places also call them in on weekends” (CT2). “...Especially in restaurants, enterprises change our students’ schedules a lot. Because they provide more intensive service at night, students are made to work in the evening” (CT4). “We go at the time the student is supposed to be working and the student isn’t there... when we ask the student, they say ‘Teacher, please don’t say anything, I don’t want trouble, otherwise I’ll be fired,’ so we end up being the only ones who know the problem; we don’t want to be the reason they get fired.” The same teacher added: “...We have many students who sleep when they come to school. And they say they rest at school... it is truly very sad for us; as a mother myself, I feel even more upset, but unfortunately there is nothing we can do...” thereby acknowledging that they may remain passive in the face of these problems. (CT2) noted: “Although they have leave rights set by law, enterprises do not allow them to use their leave; some students do not even know they have such rights” (CT1).

In previous years, workplace safety inspections in enterprises within the scope of vocational and technical education were carried out by OHS specialists; under MESEM, this responsibility has been assigned to teachers. Teachers inspect enterprises and complete and sign a form regarding whether OHS conditions are met. When CTs were asked about OHS measures in enterprises, their responses again highlighted inadequacy, neglect, and potential problems in this area. The core emphasis was that students are made to work without sufficient precautions and without protective equipment. It was stated that the inadequacy of these measures creates even greater problems for students who work excessive hours: “If our student works in metal, machinery, wood technologies, beauty and hair care services, or food services, their working hours can be quite long. When working time is exceeded, their physical and psychological condition deteriorates, their concentration decreases, and the likelihood of accidents increases. And if the necessary protective measures are not taken in this case, the problem grows exponentially” (CT4). “There are those who hand them the equipment related to the task and say ‘Start,’ without any briefing. How can we even talk about OHS in these enterprises?” (CT1). “...It may vary by sector; we discuss this a lot among ourselves. But I don’t think it is right for a 14-, 15-, 16-year-old child to work in the industrial zone or at a carpenter’s workshop. No matter how many precautions they take... believe me, even at these ages some children have weak motor skills, and when adverse working conditions are added, they cannot protect themselves and accidents happen” (CT3). “The other day, a student of mine working at a hair salon burned her hand with a hair dryer—quite a serious burn—but her boss didn’t allow her to leave, saying ‘we have work’... even while telling me, she was crying as if it had just happened; what can we do—we can do nothing...” (CT2). “In addition, because children at this age cannot manage their psychology well, some work environments are very challenging and oppressive...” (CT1).

Furthermore, all CTs, while describing their workplace observations, stated: “Children work the same way other workers do. In other words, these children work no differently than workers.” This statement undermines the claim that students are present in enterprises for educational purposes and clearly demonstrates that their de facto working conditions resemble those of adult workers. “I also want to add that a large proportion of children working within the scope of MESEM are from low-income families—so they work for money... but most work a lot and earn little... and the money they earn is not for themselves; it contributes directly to the household” (CT1, CT3).

In summary, the interviews with CTs indicate that students participate in working life more as auxiliary labor than as learners acquiring vocational skills; that working conditions are adverse; that OHS measures are inadequate; that psychological and emotional difficulties are experienced; and that wages are insufficient.

As the interviews concluded, CTs also wished to express their own circumstances. They stated that both teaching duties at school and conducting workplace visits place strain on them, and that their workload is intense: “Besides my teaching load, I have 10–12 workplace visits per week, and I do this with my own resources. It is very difficult both economically and physically” (CT4). “...Each enterprise I inspect is in a different location; I get very tired” (CT2). “Some enterprise owners’ behavior is very rude even to us; I can’t even imagine what it is like for students...” (CT3, CT1). “There are employers with whom we have communication problems; because they see students not as our students but as their own employees, their attitude toward us is harsh” (CT2). “We receive additional pay for this task, but it is not sufficient; sometimes, after our own expenses, the payment becomes meaningless” (CT1). The other CTs expressed similar views.

Although the CTs agreed during the interviews that monitoring students working within the scope of MESEM is highly important, they stated that they are unable to carry out supervision processes effectively due to a number of structural barriers encountered during the monitoring process. Insufficient travel allowances, lack of time, and legal gaps and ambiguities were identified as the most fundamental structural obstacles. First, the inadequacy of travel allowances limits the frequency and scope of supervision visits, thereby restricting the presence of CTs in the field. This situation makes it difficult to effectively monitor the working conditions of students. Second, time constraints hinder the comprehensive

and regular implementation of the supervision process. Since CTs have to carry out both their institutional duties and field visits within the same time frame, they stated that it becomes difficult to conduct supervision in accordance with the planned standards. Third, legal gaps and ambiguities limit the enforcement power of CTs and make it difficult to ensure consistency in the supervision process. The lack of clear legal and institutional frameworks for addressing risks or inappropriate practices encountered during supervision reduces teachers' capacity to intervene and allows systemic problems to persist. The CTs emphasized that these structural barriers limit the effectiveness of the supervision process and constitute a significant risk factor for ensuring safe working conditions for students in MESEM. They stressed that structural improvements—such as increasing financial resources, providing support for time management, and clarifying legislation—are necessary for them to carry out their duties more effectively. (CT1) stated, *“We truly want to conduct frequent inspections; we also have children and do not want any problems to occur. However, our travel allowances are limited—almost nonexistent—which prevents us from being present in the field,”* highlighting that the lack of travel allowances restricts field visits. (CT2) referred to time constraints and stated, *“Both our institutional responsibilities and field visits fall on us at the same time, which makes it very difficult to implement the standard inspections we plan.”* Legal ambiguity was identified as another barrier encountered during supervision. (CT3) and (CT4) noted, *“We do not clearly know in which situations we can apply what kind of sanctions, and this disrupts the consistency of the process,”* emphasizing that legal uncertainties limit enforcement power. In the overall evaluation, the CTs particularly emphasized that these barriers restrict the effectiveness of supervision and make it difficult to ensure safe working conditions for students. All CTs stated that *“If there were more resources, clearer legislation, and support for time management, we could perform our work much more effectively and better observe the problems in the field,”* and they expressed their awareness of the importance of supervision for students. (CT2), (CT3), and (CT4) also noted that when they occasionally talk with students, the students sometimes say, *“When you visit the workplace more frequently, we feel safer, and the employers treat us better.”*

### Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of the study clearly demonstrate that socio-economic dynamics play a dominant and determining role in shaping students' orientation towards MESEM. When the underlying motivations behind students' participation in MESEM are examined, it becomes evident that their decision to choose this pathway is shaped less by individual interest or a desire to learn a profession and more by economic necessities, family expectations, and a sense of academic exclusion experienced within the formal education system. This situation also provides striking insights into the structural function of vocational education in Türkiye and how social inequalities are reflected in educational choices.

The statements of the students who participated in the interviews indicate that economic reasons constitute the primary motivation behind their orientation toward MESEM, whether this decision originates from their families or from the students themselves. Rather than reflecting a desire to “learn a profession” through education, this choice often emerges as part of a household livelihood strategy. Under current economic conditions, for many families the opportunity for a child to earn an “apprenticeship wage” or secure a form of early income represents a significant contribution to the family budget. This situation is particularly evident among low- and lower-middle income groups, where education is not always perceived as a long-term “investment,” but rather as an “opportunity” capable of generating short-term income. In this context, MESEM is viewed as an economic instrument: for families, it indirectly reduces educational expenses and directly provides financial support through the income brought home by the student. At the same time, from the perspective of the labor market, it functions as a policy mechanism that fulfills the demand for low-cost labor.

Another fundamental dimension intertwined with economic factors is the negative belief regarding academic success and a lack of self-confidence. This appears as a common perception reflected by families, reinforced by school teachers, and shared by the students themselves. Students who do not see themselves as sufficient in their educational lives, or who are positioned as such due to school performance, view MESEM as a “way out” or a “suitable alternative.” This is sometimes an internalized belief of the student regarding their own educational process, and sometimes a result of the family's judgment that “this child won't study.” Furthermore, the uncertainty of the future after school life and discourses such as “let them learn a trade instead of studying” or “let them have a golden bracelet (a craft) on their wrist” trivialize education and position it as a secondary field. At this precise point, MESEM constitutes an important place for students with problematic educational backgrounds stemming from socio-economic reasons.

While the research reveals that students within the scope of MESEM turn to this system largely for socio-economic reasons, it also uncovers the fact that this creates a critical area of sensitivity and vulnerability regarding their working conditions. Due to their status as “apprentices” or “interns,” their lack of experience, and their economic dependence, working students face more disadvantaged, precarious, and unsupervised working conditions compared to standard employees. This situation emerges as a result of both legislative gaps and widespread violations in practice. MESEM students hold an ambiguous status by carrying both “student” and “worker/apprentice” labels simultaneously. This

creates a dilemma in the policies to be applied to them: education legislation or labor law? This ambiguity regarding which should take precedence can lead to grievances.

The study also identified significant inadequacies regarding wages. Although the wages received are perceived as a contribution by many families, they remain far below the minimum standard subsistence. Under these conditions, students may become economically dependent on the employer, which can lead them to act hesitantly when it comes to claiming their rights.

Students also experience problems related to working hours and the right to rest. It has been observed that they are often exposed to excessive working hours. Although the weekly working hours of students receiving on-the-job training on school days are limited by regulation, in practice these limits are frequently exceeded; working overtime or being required to work on weekends are commonly encountered situations. Some employers justify this by arguing that students need to spend more time in the workplace in order to learn the job, and therefore present longer working hours than those of regular workers as normal, which contributes to the perception that this situation does not constitute a problem.

Students who attend school only one day per week are often unable to benefit adequately from theoretical education due to the intense and physically demanding work schedule. In some cases, they even lose faith in the value of education, perceiving school primarily as a place to rest.

In terms of working life, the master-apprentice relationship, which is both desirable and constitutes the fundamental purpose of vocational and technical education, has largely shifted away from its instructive role at the workplace level. It now functions primarily as a mechanism for task completion under the unchecked authority of the master. To maintain their current position, students are often compelled to comply with unsafe instructions, verbal abuse, or even mobbing. It has also been observed that in most workplaces, the employer-master-instructor profile lacks pedagogical training. Visits by CTs are insufficient to address the existing problems, and even when issues are identified, they often remain unresolved.

The data regarding physical working conditions and the lack of equipment indicate that students are working in environments that are inadequate in terms of OHS standards. In many workplaces, the existing conditions are also insufficient in terms of basic infrastructure. Employers often fail to provide students with personal protective equipment (PPE) appropriate to the risks of the job—such as safety shoes, goggles, gloves, helmets, masks, etc.—or, citing cost concerns, do not supply equipment of sufficient quality.

Regarding hazardous and dangerous work, although the legislation includes a list of heavy and hazardous tasks prohibited for apprentices and child workers, it has been observed that in certain sectors—particularly the automotive and metal industries—students within this category are employed under adverse conditions and without effective or adequate supervision.

The study reveals that the working conditions of MESEM students contain systematic risks that further exacerbate their socio-economic disadvantages. Although the findings obtained from the Mersin case cannot be directly generalized, considering the contextual nature of qualitative research, they have the potential to be transferred to other contexts with similar structural conditions. Within this framework, “child labor” has become institutionalized within MESEM, with school-aged children experiencing a weakened connection to formal education. School is often viewed merely as a means to enter the workforce, and students are continuously exposed to psychological and physical abuse risks. In summary, based on the data, MESEM appears as a form of work in which child labor is integrated into the labor market at an early age and under insecure conditions. Interviews and observations clearly indicate that the implementation of MESEM takes place under working conditions that negatively affect children’s physical, mental, emotional, and social development. For a significant portion of the students involved, it can be concluded that socio-economic conditions are the primary determining factor, and that children from poor or low-income families participate in the process without questioning the difficult and adverse conditions.

Although the focus of the study is on the working conditions of students employed within MESEM, emphasizing the losses in the educational domain caused by heavy workloads is also critical for understanding the core problems in this area. These losses are not limited to declining academic achievement; they produce multidimensional and interrelated consequences, including a weakened sense of school belonging, reduced opportunities for social interaction, and decreased motivation for learning. In this context, examining the interaction between working conditions and the right to education in a separate study would be important, as it would allow for a holistic assessment of MESEM practices, taking into account their impact on students’ academic, social, and psychological development.

#### **Ethics Committee Approval Information**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Mersin University with the decision dated 30.04.2025 and numbered 140.

**Financial Support**

There is no financial support for this study.

## References

- Bolat, Y. (2017). *Türkiye’de mesleki ve teknik eğitimin mevcut durumu ve farklı ülkelerle karşılaştırılması*, Pegem Akademi.
- Creswell, J.W. (2018). *Nitel araştırma yöntemleri: Beş yaklaşıma göre nitel araştırma ve araştırma deseni*, (M. Bütün & S. B. Demir, Çev. Ed.) Siyasal Kitabevi.
- Çöpoğlu, M. (2018). Türkiye’de çocuk işçiliği. *Iğdır Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 14, 357-398. <https://izlik.org/JA57MC34XR>
- Ekşioğlu, S., & Taşpınar, M. (2019). Türkiye’de mesleki ve teknik ortaöğretimin gelişimi. *Sakarya University Journal of Education*, 9(3), 614-627. <https://doi.org/10.19126/suje.657776>
- Eğitim Reformu Girişimi (12 Aralık, 2025). *Eğitim İzleme Raporu 2024*, <https://egitimreformugirisimi.org/yayinlar/egitim-izleme-raporu-2024/>
- Eurydice. (2020). *Vocational education and training in europe*. <http://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/education-and-training-europe-2020-responses-eu-member-states>
- International Labour Organization. (1996). *Child Labour: targeting the intolerable*, Geneva, International Labour Office, [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/GR1998\\_Child\\_Labour\\_Targeting\\_the\\_Intolerable\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/GR1998_Child_Labour_Targeting_the_Intolerable_EN.pdf)
- İlik, B., Türkmen, Z. & Geter, R. (1994). *Sokaktan ustalığa*. International Labour Organization (ILO), IPEC Publications.
- Korber, M. (2019). Does vocational education give a labour market advantage over the whole career? A comparison of the United Kingdom and Switzerland. *Social Inclusion*, 7(3), 202-223. <http://doi.org/10.17645/si.v7i3.2030>
- Lodico, M., Spaulding, D., & Voegtler, K. (2006). *Methods in educational research: From theory to practice*. Jossey-Bass.
- Millî Eğitim Kanunu (1973). *Resmi Gazete* (Sayı: 14574).
- Mesleki Eğitim Kanunu (1986). *Resmi Gazete* (Sayı: 19139).
- Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı (2021). *Mesleki eğitim merkezleri: Geleceğin meslekleri*. Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı Yayınları.
- Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı (2025). *Mesleki eğitim merkezi (çıraklık eğitimi) uygulamaları*. [https://kazanmesem.meb.k12.tr/meb\\_iys\\_dosyalar/06/14/973307/dosyalar/2025\\_02/24140126\\_mesemuygulamalari.pdf](https://kazanmesem.meb.k12.tr/meb_iys_dosyalar/06/14/973307/dosyalar/2025_02/24140126_mesemuygulamalari.pdf)
- Millî Eğitim Bakanlığının Teşkilat ve Görevleri Hakkında Kanun Hükmünde Kararname (Kanun No. 6764). (2016). *Resmi Gazete* (Sayı: 29913).
- Özdemir, E. (2011). Alman mesleki eğitim sistemi ve Türkiye ile karşılaştırması. *Ekonomik forum*. <https://haber.tobb.org.tr/ekonomikforum/2011/07/072-076.pdf> (Erişim tarihi: 11.03.2026)
- Sallangül, S. (2025, April). Çocuk işçi gerçeği: Mesleki eğitim merkezlerinin (MESEM) “öğrenci-çırakları”. *Gencemek*, 69–73.
- Şimşek, A. (1999). *Türkiye’de mesleki ve teknik eğitimin yeniden yapılandırılması*. TÜSİAD Yayınları. <https://www.tusiad.org/tr/yayinlar/raporlar/item/1852-turkiyede-mesleki-ve-teknik-egitimin-yeniden-yapilandirilmasi>. (Erişim tarihi: 11.03.2026).
- Türkiye İşveren Sendikaları Konfederasyonu (TİSK). (1997). *Türkiye’de ve dünyada mesleki eğitim: Türk özel sektörünün karşılaştığı sorunlar ve çözüm önerileri*.
- Ünker, P. (2025). *MESEM: Eğitimin gölgesinde çocuk işçiliği* <https://www.dw.com/tr/mesem-e%C4%9Fitimin-g%C3%B6lgesinde-%C3%A7ocuk-i%C5%9F%C3%A7ili%C4%9Fi/a-75019108>
- Nasuhbeyoğlu, V. (2025). *2025: Sınıfta açlık, okuldan kopuş, MESEM’lerde ölüm...* <https://www.isigmeclisi.org/21533-2025-sinifta-acilik-okuldan-kopus-mesem-lerde-olum-vural-nasuhbe>
- Yıldırım, A., & Şimşek, H. (2018). *Sosyal bilimlerde nitel araştırma yöntemleri* (11. bs.). Seçkin Yayıncılık.

## Genişletilmiş Özet

### Giriş

Türkiye’de mesleki ve teknik eğitimin geliştirilmesi ve nitelikli iş gücünün yetiştirilmesi amacıyla kurulan Mesleki Eğitim Merkezleri (MESEM), gençlerin istihdam edilebilirliğini artırmayı ve sanayinin ihtiyaç duyduğu becerileri kazandırmayı hedefleyen, teorik eğitim ile iş yerinde uygulamayı birleştiren yapılar olarak tanımlanmaktadır (MEB, 2021). Ancak söz konusu eğitim sürecinin uygulamadaki işleyişi, başlangıçta belirlenen amaçlarla önemli ölçüde çelişen bir görünüm ortaya koymuştur. Öğrencilerin mezun olduktan sonra emek piyasasına daha kolay uyum sağlamalarının hedeflendiği şekilde ifade edilen bu model, uygulamada çoğu zaman işverenler açısından düşük maliyetli bir işgücü temin etme mekanizmasına dönüşmüştür. Özellikle 2021 yılında gerçekleştirilen yasal düzenleme ile tüm meslek liselerinde MESEM uygulamasına geçilmesi ve bu kapsamda çalıştırılan öğrencilere yapılacak ödemeler ile iş kazası ve meslek hastalığı sigorta primlerinin İşsizlik Sigortası Fonu’ndan karşılanmasına karar verilmesi, modelin yaygınlaşmasını hızlandırmıştır. Bu süreçte İŞKUR, MEB ve işverenler arasındaki işbirliği doğrultusunda her yıl sayısı artan çocuk ve genç, “mesleki eğitim” adı altında işyerlerine yönlendirilmiş ve fiilen düşük maliyetli işgücü olarak istihdam edilmiştir. Nitekim bu durum, söz konusu alandaki politika yapıcılar tarafından da “işveren üzerindeki maddi yükü ortadan kaldıran oldukça cazip bir mekanizma” olarak ifade edilmektedir. Programın tanıtım faaliyetlerinde ise “Mesleki Eğitim Merkezleri ‘SENİ’ bekliyor” sloganı kullanılmaktadır.

Kamuoyunda MESEM uygulaması, çoğunlukla çocuk işçiliği, eğitim hakkı ihlali ve kamu kaynaklarının işverenlere aktarımı gibi başlıklar üzerinden tartışılmakta; öğrencilerin çalışma koşullarının yetersiz ve olumsuz olduğu yönündeki değerlendirmeler ile öne çıkmaktadır. Bu tartışmaların temelinde, işletmelerdeki uygulamalı eğitim süreçlerinin yeterince denetlenememesi, öğrencilerin olumsuz çalışma koşullarına maruz kalması ve bazı durumlarda düşük maliyetli işgücü olarak görülmeleri yer almaktadır.

Meslek liseleri, öğrencileri hem toplumsal yaşama hazırlayan hem de mesleki bilgi ve beceri kazandıran önemli eğitim kurumları olarak sistem içinde yer alırken son yıllarda MESEM uygulamasıyla birlikte bu yapıda dönüşüm yaşandığı ve sistemin farklı işlevler kazandığı görülmektedir. Bu nedenle MESEM, eğitim politikaları ve kamu yönetimi açısından yeniden değerlendirilmesi gereken önemli bir alan olarak öne çıkmakta; ortaya çıkan sorunların politika düzeyinde ele alınması ve bütüncül biçimde düzenlenmesi gerekmektedir.

### Yöntem

MESEM kapsamında çalışan öğrencilerin çalışma koşullarını ayrıntılı biçimde incelemek amacıyla, nitel veri toplama tekniklerinden yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu hazırlanmış ve katılımcılarla görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırmanın alanını, Mersin ilinde MESEM kapsamında çalışan öğrenciler oluşturmaktadır. Çalışma kapsamında 20 öğrenci ile yarı yapılandırılmış soru formu doğrultusunda derinlemesine mülakatlar yapılmıştır.

MESEM kapsamında çalışan öğrenci sayısının gerçekte çok daha fazla olduğu bilinmekle birlikte, örneklem büyüklüğünün bu şekilde belirlenmesinin temel nedeni nitel araştırmalarda verilerin belirli bir noktadan sonra kendini tekrar etmeye başlamasıyla çalışmanın doygunluğa ulaştığının kabul edilmesidir. Nitel araştırmalarda doygunluk kavramı, örneklem büyüklüğünün belirlenmesindeki güçlükler ve bu konuda kesin bir sayısal hesaplama formülünün bulunmaması nedeniyle önemli bir ölçüt olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Bu nedenle araştırmaların, yeni ve farklı verilerin elde edilemediği noktada sonlandırılması gerektiği genel olarak kabul edilmektedir. Çalışmada farklı okullardan rastgele seçilen 20 öğrenci ile görüşme yapılması planlanmış ve örneklem büyüklüğü bu doğrultuda belirlenmiştir. Araştırma sürecinde; farklı okullarda öğrenim gören ve MESEM kapsamında çalışan öğrenciler arasından tamamen gönüllülük esasına dayalı olarak araştırmaya katılmayı kabul eden öğrencilerle görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Görüşmeler sırasında katılımcıların verdikleri yanıtların niteliğine ve görüşmenin akışına bağlı olarak, soru formunu destekleyici ek sorular yöneltilmiş ve böylece daha derinlemesine analiz yapılmasına olanak sağlayacak veriler elde edilmiştir. Nitekim Lodico ve diğerleri (2006), yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formlarının kullanıldığı araştırmalarda görüşme sürecinin esnek bir yapıya sahip olduğunu; görüşmenin akışına bağlı olarak bazı soruların çıkarılabileceğini ya da yeni soruların eklenebileceğini belirtmektedir.

Araştırma 10 Mayıs 2025 tarihinde başlamış ve 01 Haziran 2025 tarihinde tamamlanmıştır. Elde edilen veriler betimsel bir bakış açısıyla analiz edilmiştir. Araştırma sürecinin tüm aşamalarında etik ilkelere bağlı kalınmış; katılımcılara araştırmanın amacı hakkında bilgi verilmiş, gönüllülük esasına dayalı katılım sağlanmış ve kişisel bilgilerin gizli tutulacağı açıkça ifade edilmiştir. Araştırma, Mersin Üniversitesi Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Etik Kurulu onayı doğrultusunda yürütülmüştür. Verilerin toplanması amacıyla yapılan derinlemesine mülakatlarda öğrencilerin çalışma koşullarını ve sorunlarını ortaya koymak temel hedef olmakla birlikte deneyimlerini, düşüncelerini ve duygularını anlamak da amaçlanmıştır. Ayrıca yapılan çalışmayı sonlandırma aşamasında öğrencilerden elde edilen verilerle birlikte mesleki eğitimin tüm yönlerini yansıtmak amacıyla öğrencilerin bu süreçlerini doğrudan gözlemleyen ve yönlendiren koordinatör

öğretmenlerinde görüşlerine başvurma ihtiyacı doğmuştur. Koordinatör öğretmen görüşlerinin alınması elde edilen bulguların güvenilirliğini ve geçerliliğini arttırmak amacıyla tercih edilmiştir. Bu kapsamda farklı okullarda görev yapan gönüllü olarak çalışmaya destek veren 4 koordinatör öğretmenle görüşülmüştür.

### **Bulgular ve Tartışma/Sonuç**

MESEM bünyesinde yer alan öğrencilerin bu yönelimi tercih etmelerinin ardında yatan temel motivasyonlar incelendiğinde, sosyo-ekonomik dinamiklerin belirleyici ve baskın bir rol oynadığı açıkça görülmektedir. Öğrencilerin eğitim hayatlarında MESEM’i tercih etmeleri çoğu durumda bireysel ilgi ya da belirli bir mesleği öğrenme isteğinden ziyade; ekonomik zorunluluklar, ailevi beklentiler ve akademik süreçlerde hissedilen dışlanmışlık duygusu ile şekillenmektedir. Bu durum, Türkiye’de mesleki eğitimin yapısal işlevine ilişkin önemli ipuçları sunarken, aynı zamanda toplumsal eşitsizliklerin eğitim tercihleri üzerindeki etkisini de ortaya koyan dikkat çekici bulgulara işaret etmektedir.

MESEM’e yönelim, çoğu durumda meslek öğrenme, edinme motivasyonundan ziyade, ailelerin ekonomik geçim stratejilerinin bir parçası olarak şekillenmektedir. Günümüz ekonomik koşullarında pek çok aile için çocukların erken yaşta “çıraklık maaşı” elde etmesi ya da bir gelir kaynağına sahip olması, hane bütçesine katkı sağlayan önemli bir unsur olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Bu durum özellikle düşük ve orta-alt gelir gruplarında eğitimin uzun vadeli bir yatırım olarak görülmesinden ziyade, kısa vadede gelir sağlayabilecek bir fırsat olarak algılanmasına yol açmaktadır. Bu bağlamda MESEM, aileler açısından hem eğitim sürecine ilişkin mali yüklerin dolaylı biçimde azalmasına hem de öğrencinin elde ettiği gelir aracılığıyla hane ekonomisine doğrudan katkı sağlamasına imkân tanıyan bir mekanizma olarak görülmektedir. Ayrıca sistem işgücü piyasası açısından da düşük maliyetli işgücü talebini karşılayan bir politika aracı niteliği taşımaktadır.

Ekonomik faktörlerle ilişkili bir diğer önemli unsur, öğrencilerin akademik başarıya yönelik olumsuz inançları ve buna bağlı gelişen özgüven eksikliğidir. Bu algı hem ailelerin değerlendirmeleri hem de okul çevresindeki yönlendirmeler aracılığıyla güçlenmekte ve öğrenciler tarafından içselleştirilmektedir. Kendini akademik açıdan yetersiz gören öğrenciler, MESEM’i çoğu zaman bir çıkış yolu ya da daha uygun bir alternatif olarak değerlendirmektedir. Bu yönelim, hem öğrencinin kendi yetersizlik algısından hem de ailelerin “bu çocuk okumaz” şeklindeki yönlendirmelerinden etkilenmektedir. Ayrıca, geleceğe ilişkin belirsizlikler ve “bir meslek öğrensin”, “elinde bir altın bilezik olsun” gibi yaygın toplumsal söylemler, akademik eğitime devam etme isteğini zayıflatmakta ve kısa vadeli mesleki kazanımları ön plana çıkarmaktadır. Araştırma, MESEM kapsamında yer alan öğrencilerin büyük ölçüde sosyo-ekonomik nedenlerle bu sisteme yönelindiklerini ortaya koyarken, aynı zamanda öğrencilerin çalışma koşullarında önemli bir hassasiyet ve kırılabilirlik alanı oluşturduğunu da göstermektedir. Çalışan öğrenciler, “çırak” veya “stajyer” statüleri, deneyimsizlikleri ve ekonomik bağımlılıkları nedeniyle, standart çalışanlarla kıyaslandığında daha dezavantajlı, güvencesiz ve denetimsiz çalışma koşullarına maruz kalmaktadır. Bu durum, hem mevzuattaki boşluklardan hem de uygulamadaki yaygın ihاللerden kaynaklanmaktadır.

Araştırma bulguları, MESEM kapsamında yer alan öğrencilerin çalışma yaşamında ücret, çalışma süreleri, dinlenme hakları ve İSG uygulamaları açısından çeşitli sorunlar ve yetersizliklerle karşılaştığını net bir biçimde ortaya koymaktadır. Elde edilen ücretler bazı aileler tarafından ekonomik katkı olarak değerlendirilmekle birlikte, bu gelir düzeyi asgari yaşam standardının oldukça altında kalmaktadır. Bu durum, öğrencilerin ekonomik açıdan işverene bağımlı hale gelmesine ve hak talep etme süreçlerinde daha çekingen davranmalarına yol açarak dezavantajlı bir konum yaratmaktadır.

Çalışma süreleri açısından ise öğrencilerin yoğun ve uzun saatler boyunca çalıştıkları hem kendileri tarafından ifade edilmiş hemde koordinatör öğretmenleri tarafından denetimlerdeki gözlemlerle doğrulanmıştır. Her ne kadar mevzuatta öğrencilerin haftalık çalışma süreleri sınırlandırılmış olsa da, uygulamada bu sınırların sıklıkla aşıldığı, öğrencilerin fazla mesai kaldığı ve hafta sonu çalıştırıldığı ortaya çıkmaktadır. Bazı işverenlerin bu durumu “meslek öğrenme süreci” kapsamında değerlendirerek, öğrencilerin standart çalışanlara kıyasla daha uzun süre çalışmasını olağan bir durum olarak sundukları ve bu yolla söz konusu uygulamayı normalleştirdikleri belirlenmiştir. Haftada yalnızca bir gün okula devam eden öğrenciler ise yoğun iş temposu nedeniyle teorik eğitimden yeterince yararlanamamakta, zamanla eğitim motivasyonlarında azalma yaşanmakta ve okulu çoğunlukla dinlenme alanı olarak algılama eğilimi göstermektedir.

Çalışma yaşamına ilişkin bir diğer önemli bulgu, usta-çırak ilişkisinin pedagojik niteliğini büyük ölçüde kaybetmiş olmasıdır. Usta pozisyonundaki kişilerin ağırlıklı olarak üretim süreçlerine odaklandığı, bu nedenle öğretici rolün geride kaldığı görülmektedir. Bu bağlamda öğrenciler, çoğu zaman denetimsiz bir otorite altında çalışmakta ve işlerini sürdürebilmek adına güvensiz talimatlara, zaman zaman sözlü baskı ve mobbing uygulamalarına maruz kalabilmektedir. Ayrıca işyerlerinde pedagojik formasyona sahip olmayan işveren ve usta profillerinin yaygın olduğu belirlenmiştir. Koordinatör öğretmenlerin işyeri ziyaretlerinin ise mevcut sorunların tespiti ve çözümünde çoğu zaman yetersiz kaldığı anlaşılmaktadır.

Fiziksel çalışma ortamı ve ekipman eksiklikleri açısından elde edilen verilerde, öğrencilerin İSG standartları açısından yetersiz koşullarda çalıştığını göstermektedir. İşyerlerinde temel altyapı eksiklikleri yaygın olup, işverenler çoğu zaman öğrenciler için işin riskine uygun kişisel koruyucu donanım—koruyucu ayakkabı, gözlük, eldiven, baret, maske gibi araçlar—temin etmemekte veya maliyet gerekçesiyle yeterli kalitedeki ekipmanları sağlamamaktadır. Ağır ve tehlikeli işlere ilişkin, Mevzuatta çırak ve çocuk işçilerin çalıştırılması yasak olan ağır ve tehlikeli işler listesi bulunmasına rağmen

bazı alanlarda, özellikle otomotiv ve metal sektörlerinde bu kapsamdaki öğrencilerin olumsuz koşullarda, etkili, yeterli denetimden uzak çalıştırıldığı görülmektedir.

Ayrıca, MESEM öğrencilerinin çalışma koşullarının, öğrencilerin sosyo-ekonomik durumlarını daha da derinleştiren sistematik riskler içerdiğini de Araştırma ortaya koymaktadır. Mersin özelinde yürütülen bu araştırmanın bulguları, Türkiye’deki mesleki eğitim uygulamalarına ilişkin genel çıkarımlar yapmak açısından da önemli veriler sunmaktadır. Araştırma kapsamında, MESEM bünyesinde “çocuk işçiliği”nin kurumsallaştığı, eğitim çağındaki öğrencilerin eğitimle bağlarının zayıfladığı ve okula devam etmenin çoğu zaman işe girebilmenin bir aracı olarak görüldüğü saptanmıştır. Veriler ışığında MESEM, çocuk emeğinin işgücü piyasasına erken, güvencesiz ve denetimsiz bir biçimde entegre edildiği bir çalışma modeli olarak tanımlanabilir.