



Supported Education

3.5.3 Associação para o Estudo e Integração Psicossocial (AEIPS) – Supported Education Program

1. Introduction and collaborating organizations

In Portugal there is no specific governmental program or legislation about Supported Education for people with mental illness and no specific funding for Supported Education programs.

In 2008, a law was approved that promotes equal opportunities and values education as well as an inclusive and democratic school oriented to the academic success of children and young people. This law (3/2008 of 07 January) puts into place the Student with Educational Special Needs status (SESN) to be applied at primary and secondary levels of education.

This status provides specialized support, which can imply adapting strategies, resources, contents, procedures and instruments as well as using support technologies. There's no specific legislation for students with special needs in higher education, so this status is adapted by universities with different interpretations and forms.

Due to the lack of specific programs to support people with mental illness in accessing education, AEIPS (Associação para o Estudo e Integração Psicossocial), a private nonprofit organization created in 1987 by a group of professionals, families and people with mental illness, implemented in 2001 the first Supported Education program for people with mental illness.

This program provides a set of support services through choosing, getting and keeping educational projects at all levels of education (literacy courses, elementary and secondary education, higher education – undergraduate, master's and PhD), creating links to the community as well as social and school integration. With the right support, students are able to complete their educational goals (Unger, 1998).

2. History of the Program

After the creation in 2001 of the Supported Education program whose goal was to allow access to schools in the community to all participants who wished to improve their academic level of education, AEIPS established several protocols with education and training

centers as well as schools and universities, providing support to students and acting as a consultant to teachers and schools in order to ensure students' academic success.

There were two key moments in divulging Supported Education in Portugal: The first was in 2004 when AEIPS organized the international conference "Participation and Empowerment of People with Mental Illness and their Families," which included a presentation by Lies Korevaar entitled "The Supported Education Program in Rotterdam" and another by Ana Franco and Fatima Freitas entitled "Uma oportunidade para voltar a estudar: modelo de educação apoiada para pessoas com doença mental." The second one was in 2007 when AEIPS organized a Supported Education conference entitled "Educação Apoiada: Suportes educativos para jovens e adultos com doença mental no ensino básico, secundário e superior," with the participation as keynote speakers of Steve Szivalgyi and Judith Cook.

3. Philosophy, Mission & Principles

Educational support programs are an important support resource for people with mental illness facilitating going back to school and supporting their school projects in formal and natural settings. Supported Education programs consist of the promotion of integration in schools and universities and are based on an empowerment perspective (Ornelas, 2008).

The acquisition of new knowledge and the improvement of academic qualifications are fundamental factors for increasing job opportunities and career development. Other positive consequences of participating in natural educational environments are the development of new social relations with colleagues and teachers, the increase of self-confidence and personal strength and developing a new personal identity (from a role of patient to a role of student), thereby contributing to the recovery process (Frado, 1993; Ornelas, 2008; Pomeroy & Pape, 1999).

The Supported Education model aims to support the integration of people with mental illness that wish to proceed with their studies in an educational setting where they may experience life as students and not as psychiatric patients (Bellamy & Mowbray, 1998).

Supported Education is defined as education in integrated settings for people with mental illness that want to go back to school requiring ongoing support services to be successful in the educational environment (Unger, 1990).

AEIPS's Supported Education program has the mission to increase the academic qualification of people with mental illness at all levels of education and in regular educational environments.

Increasing candidates' qualifications improves their access to better jobs in the open labor market.

The program's goals are: to foster participants' enrollment in educational projects; to support participants' access to schools and universities in the community; and to provide a support service that contributes to successful educational projects.

The values of the program include domains such as: the use of natural resources, for instance access to libraries, study rooms etc.; a continued support that may be provided within or out of the school setting through support meetings, support in filling out forms for application/registration, etc.; individualization of support taking into consideration students' needs and skills; accessibility to schools and training settings through sharing information about educational opportunities; and service coordination to improve natural support and academic success.

4. Participants

Supported Education participants are people with mental illness and who are enrolled in AEIPS, are over 18 years old and intend to pursue an educational goal. In 2013, the Supported Education program gave support to 16 students in choosing, getting and keeping educational projects: nine students in higher education, one student in secondary education, four students in basic education and two students in short-term educational courses.

5. Services and Activities

This program provides three types of support:

- A. Individual educational program;
- B. Students group and a college students group;
- C. Free study and supported study.

A. Individual educational program

Corresponds to the support provided individually in order to ensure access to and maintenance of the educational project of students' choice and interest. This support is provided at several levels:

- The choice of the educational project, analyzing the previous school career, the clarification of educational goals and outlining the individual educational plan;
- Access to school: promoting the relationship between the student and the school, support in the enrollment and application process, applications for scholarships, the choice of routes and transport to school;

- Coordination of resources and maintenance of the educational project: a set of brackets provided within the school (with the consent or request of the student) and out of the school.

B. Students group and college students group

This weekly meeting was established in order to respond to supporting the needs of students. In collaboration with the participants, several goals for this group were defined:

- Sharing and reflecting on the school experience and training;
- Learning to take and organize notes and information;
- Developing skills and study methods;
- Establishing goals and how to reach them;
- Discussing ways to handle the pressure of exams and assessments;
- Discussing the relationship with peers and teachers;
- Providing effective support among group members in carrying out work.

C. Free study and supported study

Our community center provides study rooms, as well as resource materials such as computer equipment, Internet access and photocopying. Each student can use these spaces as previously planned.

Monitoring also includes a study plan and an individualized support program, and provides information for accessing other resources in the community (libraries, conferences, study places, etc.).

Examples of services and activities that we provide are:

At school:

- support with filling out forms for application/registration
- getting information about, and making applications for financial aid for students
- helping students to discover and use school resources (library, cafeteria, academic tutor)
- speaking with teachers and negotiating reasonable accommodation
- linking with student support office

Outside school:

- organizing time and study methods
- providing resources (study rooms, Internet, computers)
- use of community resources (libraries, conferences)
- student support group (weekly meeting established in order to respond to students' needs: sharing experiences and peer support; time management; developing study methods;

selecting classes; test preparation; homework; relationships (peers and teachers; problem solving).

An example of a Supported Education plan for a student to access and maintain a graduate course in geography:

1. Definition of a general schedule with classes, study time and sports (jogging on the university campus);
2. Individual weekly meetings – “we spoke about everything, integration difficulties, my successes and less good moments”;
3. Support and monitoring in the application for a scholarship;
4. Collaboration with the head of the University Students’ Support Office to access Students’ Special Needs Status, which offers some of the following possibilities:
 - a. Changes in the timelines for assignments;
 - b. Taking the exams in a separate room;
 - c. Part-time status

“It is important to note that I did not need these services because the main support was given by the Supported Education program.”

5. Students Support Group – “The participation in the students group was essential for sharing experiences and defining strategies.”

6. Evaluation

In 2011, a program evaluation was carried out to evaluate the level of satisfaction of students regarding the service provided by the Supported Education program. All students (N=20) enrolled in the program filled out a questionnaire, “Qualitative Indicators for Supported Education Service Users,” which was adapted from “Qualitative Indicators for Supported Employment Service Users,” developed under the Supported Employment Project of the EU Equal Program. It used a Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always) with five factors: Welcoming, Self-determination, School Integration, Support in Maintenance, Rights and Duties. The mean of the results in all factors was 4 or above 4, which means that there was an overall satisfaction with the program quality.

7. Success Factors

These types of programs that promote community integration through participation in natural educational settings allow the acquisition of new social roles: From the stigmatized role of mental patient to the valued role of student, this way education provides a sense of accomplishment and purpose (Unger, 1998).

Another success factor relates to the student's active participation in the development and structuring of his/her educational project, since the student makes all decisions regarding his/her project.

The support provided according to individual needs is also fundamental to the success of the program as well as the student's opportunity to increase his/her social network. This promotes a feeling of hope towards the future that contributes to the recovery process.

8. Risk Factors

1. Lack of funding for Supported Education programs
2. Students' financial difficulties
3. Lack of services that promote the integration of students within the school setting
4. Lack of effective accommodation

9. Future

In Portugal, Supported Education for people with mental illness has a long way to go in order to be a mainstream solution to preventing school dropout of students with mental health problems.

There's still little or no communication between mental health providers and educational settings, however with the ImpulSE project we intend that more students may be able to access schools through supported education programs. Also, the creation of a national and international network of Supported Education will make it possible to disseminate and advocate the right of everyone to access education in regular schools and universities. "Supported Education enhances career opportunities and promotes independence and recovery, and should be a service option available for all who are interested" (Unger, 1998).

These programs allow the increase of opportunities for participation and success in schools and university settings, contributing to a more inclusive society that understands, respects and values diversity (Ornelas, 2008).