

## **SHELTERED OR SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT OPTIONS FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES?**

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### **Abstract**

The transformations in production and labour market of the last decades and the stormy global economic crisis have diversified and made particularly difficult the conditions for the inclusion of people with disabilities into the labour market and the society in general. Students with disabilities are at high risk of unemployment and a high percentage of those who work are employed in low-paid jobs. Employment is vital for them not only for a dignified life, but also for active participation in the community. In general, they face several limitations when trying to find or maintain a job they already have. It is a common belief that people with disabilities are not able to work, except perhaps in separate and Sheltered work environments (sheltered employment) where they will be safe enough. Such negative attitudes affect decisively their success or failure to secure a job or maintain an existing one. Sheltered employment has been at the core of the vocational training and employment system for young people with significant intellectual disabilities throughout the twentieth century, and most of them continue to work within isolated and Sheltered areas. According to our literature review the emergence of supported forms of employment has brought forward a real alternative, especially for students with intellectual disabilities. Unlike the sheltered and segregated forms of employment, supported employment enables paid employment, within the community, under conditions of continuous support, and has proven to be more effective over time. Based on the concept of self-determination it emphasizes personal strengths, goals and choices and the important role of the community for the improvement and development of the disabled individual.

**Keywords:** Students with Disabilities, Secondary Special Education, Vocational Training, Sheltered Employment, Supported Employment

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Employment is crucial to the well-being and socialization of people with disabilities, who face significant obstacles and exclusions in their efforts to integrate into the open labour market. It is estimated that 75% of people with mental and developmental disabilities remain in separate, sheltered work programs (Dreilinger, 2001). In contrast to sheltered employment, the supported form enables people with significant disabilities to participate in community work and provides the necessary support at all stages involved (McLoughlin et al. 1987). This model promotes paid employment in an inclusive work environment for those who are unable to obtain and maintain employment in the open market. People who were once considered unfit for work now can work and function as productive citizens in the real workplace (Rusch, 1986).

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. Disability**

There are various conceptual approaches and models of disability, but two are the most important: the medical and the social models. Initially, the medical one was the dominant model of interpretation, according

to which the term disability refers to people with severe disabilities resulting from physical or mental impairment (Wright, 2004). To use a common tool for the definition and classification of disability, the World Health Organization implemented in 1980 an international classification system. According to the basic doctrine, disability is a consequence of physical or mental limitations of the individual regardless of the physical and social environment. As a result, the medical model emphasizes the inadequacy of the individual in policymaking and the development of treatment and rehabilitation services. The first step is to seek treatment, if this is not achieved the next step is to provide care and support services. The medical one has been for many years the dominant model in disability policymaking (Myhill and Blanck, 2009). Due to the emphasis on service delivery, people with disabilities can be "relieved" of the usual obligations of society, including work, and thus social segregation becomes justified (Blanck, 2008). This has a negative effect on the path to employment, as it limits the opportunities for people with disabilities to make choices, be financially self-sufficient and further reinforces the existing prejudices of employers and society about their inability to work (Shapiro, 1994). In those societies that apply a medical model, people with disabilities are rarely employed and, when they are, they usually work in separate contexts, something that perpetuates segregated forms of employment (Parent, 2004).

Later, the focus shifted to the so-called social model. This new approach incorporates the concept of functionality and emphasizes environmental factors. According to this model, disability is defined in relation to the general social and environmental context, i.e., the natural and social environment but also in relation to social attitudes (WHO, 2001). In the social model, which has received recognition in recent years, disability is considered the inability of the individual to meet the demands of the social environment and the values and attitudes of society (Hedlund, 2000), i.e., is a consequence of environmental, social, and psychological barriers, preventing people with disabilities from participating as much as possible in social development (Blanck et al., 2009). Once the physical and social barriers are removed, people with disabilities can be considered to have skills and be offered more opportunities to participate in social events. In this model, the responsibility for disability is transferred from the individual to society, which is ultimately the one that leads to exclusion and marginalization because of the obstacles and limitations it poses (e.g., lack of access to education, information, etc.). The social model has positive effects on the employment of disabled people and many of them have been included in supported forms of employment. This focus helps to change the negative attitude that employers and society have towards people with disabilities. The conceptual models of disability are key determinants of the employment of people with disabilities, since they function as tools for diagnosing dysfunction and play a crucial role in identifying and implementing strategies to meet the needs of people with disabilities (Myhill & Blanck, 2009).

## **2.2. Employment and People with Disabilities**

Employment is vital not only for a dignified life, but also for active participation in the community. Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities emphasizes their right to live from a job which is freely chosen, in a labour market and a working environment that are open, integrated, and accessible. The International Labour Organization estimates that 650 million people are disabled and 470 million of them are of working age. The transformations in the economy, production, and labour market of the last decades and the stormy global economic crisis have diversified and made particularly difficult the conditions for the integration of young people in society and the labour market. People with disabilities are at high risk of unemployment and a high percentage of those who work are employed in low-paid jobs. They face disproportionate levels of poverty and access to employment is the most cost-effective way to reduce them (ILO, 2007).

In the European Union, people with disabilities face several limitations when trying to find or keep a job they already have. Since the 1990s, employment promotion has been at the heart of the E.U., which has focused on matching training on the new job skills with the demands of the labour market. The lack of published monitoring data detailing disability makes difficult to assess the nature and extent of disability participation in the open labour market. Available data from the European Union show a gap between the employment rate of people with and without disabilities: in 2003, 40% of people with disabilities were employed compared to 64.2% of people without disabilities, while 52 % of people with disabilities were inactive compared to 28% of people without disabilities. A non-disabled person in the productive age group of 16 to 64 years has a 66% chance of finding a job or starting a business. For a person with a mild disability, this probability decreases to 47%, while in case of severe disability decreases even more to 25% (Magoulios & Trichopoulou, 2012).

## **2.3. Employment Models for People with Disabilities**

Without effective interventions, people with disabilities face unemployment and, ultimately, financial

dependence. The ultimate goals of various vocational rehabilitation programs are to promote effective employment and to provide a reliable source of income for people with disabilities. To achieve this, they implement interventions aimed at increasing the probability of these individuals to obtain and maintain regular paid employment, in the field of their professional interests, in the open labour market (O'Neill et al, 2015). Evaluating related vocational rehabilitation programs for people with disabilities, Wilhelm and Robinson (2013) found that the financial impact was positive and the benefit significant. People who received related services had a larger salary increase which remained stable over time and the financial benefits extended beyond the individuals, into the state itself, due to increased tax revenues and a reduction in the percentage of disability benefits provided.

There are many primary employment promotion models for people with disabilities around the world. Two of the most common are sheltered and supported employment. A key distinction between these models is that in the former people with disabilities work in a segregated environment created just for them, compared to working in an inclusive environment with other non-disabled workers. Another distinction between the two models is whether they offer regular wages or not (Kregel and Dean, 2002). In sheltered employment, people with disabilities work in a segregated environment, are trained and supervised by people without disabilities because it is taken for granted that they are less productive than workers without disabilities and at the same time the remuneration offered to them is only a percentage of that given to other employees (Kregel and Dean 2002; Blanck et al. 2003).

### *2.3.1. Sheltered Employment*

Sheltered employment has been at the core of the vocational training and employment system for adults with significant intellectual disabilities throughout the twentieth century, most of which continue to work within isolated sheltered areas. Sheltered employment became particularly popular in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s when parents had no choice but to confine their children (Taylor, 2002). In other words, they became a kind of a shelter for many families, as they provided places where their children were “safe and busy” (Dague, 2012). Regular wage work within the community was not an option for people with intellectual, developmental and other disabilities before and during the 1970s.

Despite continuing reliance on such programs, critics questioned the effectiveness of employment in segregated environments. The benefits were generally limited, often forcing individuals to remain dependent on state programs in the form of benefits (Bellamy et al., 1986). Sheltered employment programs isolate people with disabilities from the rest of the community, and that segregation increases the negative attitudes of employers and public opinion, making it more difficult to achieve effective employment (Kregel and Dean, 2002). Instead of reducing barriers to employment for people with disabilities, this segregation ultimately leads to reduced expectations and negative attitudes of the society (Wehman, 1981). Sheltered employment practices fail to offer individuals a viable employment perspective. Once they have entered a sheltered employment environment, very few people are able to move on to regular work in the open market. Also, few can achieve transition from sheltered employment to supported employment (Blanck et al., 2003) which clearly proves that sheltered employment does not have a long-term impact on both productivity and integration of people with disabilities (Murphy & Rogan, 1995).

Many prejudices and negative stereotypes about the vocational rehabilitation of people with disabilities are based on the misconception that physical or mental ability determines the ability to perform at work and that not every workplace is suitable for all people. There are fundamental differences between a philosophy based on sheltered employment and one based on community. In the first case, due to lack of education, job opportunities and the perception of providing protection from society, people with disabilities were viewed as untrained and unable to actively participate in the community. In the second case, people with disabilities are offered better education and training to get strong enough to be part of the workforce and the community, without segregation or exclusion. Many disability-related organizations have advocated for the employment of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, supporting the expansion of integrated, community-based employment programs, and are calling for an end to segregated and sheltered employment, citing the catastrophic isolation, economic exploitation, poverty and systematic failure of these services to provide effective employment (Petty, 2007; Dague, 2012).

### *2.3.2. Supported Employment*

In this context, the emergence of supported employment services in the 1980s brought forward an alternative to segregated employment, especially for people with intellectual disabilities. This is a form of employment in an inclusive work environment for those who are traditionally unable to obtain and maintain employment in the open labour market. It includes services provided in the context of regular employment in

the open market, voluntary participation, rapid job search, integrated rehabilitation, focus on the preferences of the disabled, personalized, and ongoing support (Wehman, 2012). Supported employment includes three key components: 1. Paid work: Individuals receive a salary that corresponds to the work performed. They should be paid the basic salary for a job or at least the minimum wage if it exists. 2. Open labour market: People with disabilities must be employed as regular employees with the same salaries, terms and conditions that apply to other employees. 3. Ongoing support provided at the individual level and serving the needs of both the employee and the employer (EU, 2011).

Supported employment enables people with significant disabilities to participate in community-based work, providing them with the support they need. People who were once considered "incapable of work" now work and function as productive citizens in the open labour market (Rusch, 1986; McLoughlin et al. 1987). Supported employment aims at the right to work and at placing people with disabilities in positions where they will receive a regular salary. It is based on the concept of self-determination and emphasizes personal strengths, goals and choices and the important role of the community for the improvement and development of the individual (Wehman et al., 2014). Supported employment significantly provides an economic advantage, an open market job position that ensures participation and social inclusion, autonomy, economic independence, self-esteem and acceptance of people with disabilities in society. Social exclusion is characterized by the inability to participate in the labour market and interventions should be focusing on vulnerable social groups, through targeted actions and good practices. These good practices include strengthening and implementing supported employment, through which more people with disabilities have an opportunity to work and integrate into the labour market, with a normal salary and insurance coverage since the focus is on the individual, his strengths and not his weaknesses.

The initial design of supported employment still in place served individuals at risk of being placed in sheltered and segregated environments (West et al., 2015). Daily treatment programs and sheltered workshops are not very effective in improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities (Wehman et al., 2018). Supported employment is effective in all demographics and all forms of disability and promotes the employment of people with disabilities who are at risk of unemployment or underemployment. An unemployed person is at risk of financial dependence, including dependence on welfare benefits (Drake et al., 2009). Literature reviews consistently show that supported employment has a positive effect on employment outcomes. Marshall et al. (2014) researched nine databases and reviewed 12 systematic reviews and 17 randomized controlled trials to evaluate their effectiveness for adults with mental disorders. The level of research data on supported employment was described as high. This form of employment has shown consistently positive results, including higher employment rates in the open labour market, more working hours and weeks, and higher wages for people with disabilities.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Supported employment is a modern model of providing services to people with disabilities and involves paid employment, free will participation, focus on their preferences, rapid job search, personalized and continuous support. The model is based on the logic that the requirements of a particular job determine the type of training provided. While the philosophy of supported employment contributes to better education and training with the expectation that students with disabilities will be helped to be part of the community and workforce, without segregation and exclusion, the reality is often different. A significant percentage of our fellow human beings with disabilities continue to live in segregated, sheltered work schedules due to negative stereotypes, low expectations and job opportunities and the misconception of the need to provide protection from society. The resilience of sheltered employment and the attitudes that support it are therefore a huge obstacle to the social inclusion and autonomy of people with disabilities. In this context, it is necessary that the advantages and benefits of supported employment are promoted and highlighted.

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