

RECONNECTING EDUCATION WITH HOMELESS PEOPLE

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Abstract

In recent years, the profile of homeless adults has changed greatly: the number of women has risen dramatically, as well as the number of people under 30 years of age. Currently, more than 40% in the US (Williams Institute Public Policy Fellow) and 25% in Europe (United Nations Libres & Égaux) of the more than 1.3 million homeless people (FEANTSA-2020) are between 18 and 30 years old (point at which they can be legally disowned by their family) fall into homelessness due to extreme discrimination for belonging to racialized groups, the LGBTQ+ community, or on the basis of gender.

These people suddenly find themselves on the street (expelled from their environment without any kind of protection), without resources and without any defense against the terrible threats they face... often falling into prostitution, alcoholism, and even losing their life; even if they are people without other barriers to inclusion excepting those that derive directly from the social discrimination they suffer or from their loss of a home.

As a fundamental strategy for their social reintegration, education reveals itself as an essential tool to achieve full inclusion. Access to formal education stands out in particular, not only as a fundamental right, but also as a basic mechanism for improving their employability and resocialization, which is fundamental for their full inclusion.

However, despite the better opportunities of this group for reintegration, no effective steps have been taken to achieve their educational success, largely due to its novelty, its social invisibility, and social skepticism before this new model of homeless person who doesn't fit into the established roles and brings this problem closer to their daily reality.

That is why an innovative strategy has been designed, establishing itineraries in three personalized and progressive phases for the educational reintegration of homeless people and/or people in street situation. This strategy establishes a joint work between the user and the street teams (reinforced by teachers), in accordance with the needs and characteristics of the user, in order to regenerate the educational and transversal skills needed for them to access secondary education degrees through their access to the Initial Training of Adults (ITA). These itineraries begin at the street level, continue with specific training sessions for homeless people in social entities, and end with their access to regulated training, with adapted methodologies that include pedagogical, psychosocial, and administrative aspects, adapting and providing feedback to the social and medical work they already carry out, thus providing their users with a holistic path for inclusion.

This work has been carried out within the framework of the Erasmus+ project "Reconnecting education with homeless people: walking towards inclusion through adult education adapted to the reality of homelessness", co-funded by the EU in 2024.

Keywords: Education, homeless, reconnecting, methodology, strategy.

1 INTRODUCTION

An innovative methodological strategy for the reintegration of homeless people through their access to the regulated education system is presented hereafter, it being one of the main results of the project "Reconnecting education with homeless people: walking towards inclusion through adult education

adapted to the reality of homelessness”, carried out thanks to the co-financing of the European Union through the Erasmus+ Programme.

Throughout this article we will refer to homeless people, not only those who find themselves in a street situation, but also those who are homeless, who do not have a set residence due to severe economic barriers making use of emergency shelters, asylum centers, or even temporary living at homes of acquaintances or relatives. All of them suffer from extreme precariousness, residential instability, lack of access to basic services –like health, education or social care–, constant harassment or aggression, and a high incidence of mental and physical problems aggravated by barriers to access health services. They suffer discrimination, social isolation, and difficulties in exercising fundamental rights, such as registration or participation in employment or training programmes.

Despite the fact that all homeless people share common barriers and exclusion processes, their situation is very diverse depending on profiles and host countries (on the welfare system, its social policies, climate, or ease of access to residence permits or nationality), however it is a common feature throughout the EU that this has worsened in the last ten years as a result of the multiple crises we have faced (like COVID-19), rising housing prices, weakened social protection systems, and inflation. Homeless people not only lack a roof of their own but also often lack the hope to reverse their situation and rebuild the lives they once had before oblivion finds them on any deserted street.

If we count not only those in a street situation but also homeless (the object of this strategy) the figure increases a lot. According to recent estimates by the European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) and the Abbé Pierre Foundation, in 2023, approximately 1.286.691 people were in a street situation in the European Union and the United Kingdom, 700.000 of whom are homeless. This figure includes not only those sleeping on the streets, but also those who stay in overnight shelters, temporary accommodation, or who rely on the hospitality of family and friends.

Along with other key strategies for the social reintegration of these people (aimed at legalizing their residence and/or nationality, active employment programmes, or accessing decent housing, as is the case with programmes like Housing First), education is an essential tool to achieve full inclusion. Access to formal education, in particular, stands not only as a fundamental right, but also as a basic mechanism for social inclusion and improved employability. Empirical evidence shows that educational success is directly correlated with job opportunities and economic stability: according to Eurostat (2023), the employment rate in the EU for people with tertiary level education is 84%, compared to 47% for people who completed only lower secondary education or less.

Various studies show that adapted educational reintegration with possibilities of success has a significant impact on their life trajectories, enhancing their self-confidence, setting short-term objectives, and encouraging them to take medium and long-term actions to get out of their situation. For example, in Spain, the Hatento Observatory report (2015) [2] highlights that more than 60% of homeless people would like to continue their education if they had the right support. In France, programmes promoted by organizations like Emmaüs Défi have shown that basic education and vocational training can facilitate labor insertion in less than a year. In Italy and Greece, initiatives promoted with funds from the ESF and the Erasmus+ Programme have begun to integrate inclusive educational models for marginalized populations, including homeless people and refugees.

However, in recent years the profile of homeless adults has changed greatly: the number of women has risen dramatically, as well as the number of people under 30 years old. Currently, more than 40% in the US (Williams Institute Public Policy Fellow) and 25% in Europe (United Nations Free & Égaux [3]) of the more than 1.3 million homeless people (FEANTSA-2020) are between 18 and 30 years old (age at which they can be legally disowned by their family), who fall into homelessness due to the extreme discrimination suffered due to being racialized or belonging to the LGTBIQ+ community. In Spain, the study by the Observatory for the Analysis and Visibility of Social Exclusion by Rey Juan Carlos University (2019) [4] proves that 55% of homeless people were so due to LGTBIQ+ related reasons and 35% because they were migrants; this adds to more than 80% of homeless people.

These people find themselves on the street suddenly (having been expelled from their family home or having arrived in a strange country without any kind of protection), without resources and without any defense against the terrible threats they face... often falling into prostitution, alcoholism, and even losing their life. These are people who do not have their own barriers to inclusion that do not derive directly from the social discrimination they suffer or from their loss of home.

This new profile is much more accessible to promote reintegration processes into the regulated education system because, despite still having significant barriers to access it, its potential for success

is still very high. Among others, they usually have their documentation in order, they have developed digital and basic skills (because they have completed some basic studies, even if they don't have the secondary school diploma), and even if they usually have severe depression and apathy issues, their mental illnesses are still incipient.

Despite the better opportunities for reintegration of this group, no effective steps have been taken to achieve their educational success, largely because of their novelty, but also because of their social invisibility derived from the very severe processes of exclusion they suffer, as well as because of social skepticism before this new model of homeless people who do not fit in with established roles and bring this problem closer to their daily reality. After all, any young classmate of your child could be in this situation without you knowing it.

In order to alleviate this need and bring adult education closer to new population niches it didn't reach until now, this innovative methodological strategy is proposed, combining educational and social action methods and objectives in order to promote an effective mechanism for the inclusion of homeless people through formal education.

This methodology aims to offer an effective and realistic path to technicians, social workers, and trainers from entities that work directly with homeless people and teachers from regulated adult education centers through a viable strategy for educational reintegration into the regulated system for homeless people with a comprehensive vision that contemplates addressing their situation of educational failure and exclusion through a holistic and multisectoral approach supported by social workers, doctors and experts.

2 METHODOLOGY

We propose an innovative methodological strategy that effectively promotes the social, personal, and labor inclusion of homeless people through their reintegration into the regulated education system through adult education, as well as the adaptation of this to the specific characteristics and needs of this group.

The education of homeless people must be based on a profoundly humanistic, flexible, interdisciplinary, and adaptive vision. People in street situations have life trajectories marked by multiple forms of exclusion: residential, economic, affective, educational, and health. Therefore, any educational proposal must be based on the recognition of these experiences as a constituent part of the learning process and not as a barrier to be overcome.

In this sense, this strategy brings together working methods and dynamics in both the field of social and educational action, transforming the traditional social actions of street teams (guidance, care of basic needs, mediation) into adapted non-formal training spaces that serve as a bridge to more stable formal education processes that lead to the educational and labor insertion of homeless users.

To this end, it establishes progressive itineraries in three stages of work specifically adapted to different levels of training and situation of social exclusion of the participating homeless people that combine learning sessions in a street environment with learning sessions in the classroom.

The combination of these sessions in the street and in the classroom answers to the need to articulate a coherent training itinerary that does not expel from the system those who are not yet in a position to attend an educational facility regularly. The sessions in the street act as spaces for approaching, bonding, awareness, and informal educational work, which are developed through basic skills, trust processes are reinforced, personal interests are identified, and participants are accompanied in the progressive transition to the classroom.

The classroom sessions are held at the headquarters of social entities with classrooms equipped in a simple but dignified way. A reduced capacity of a maximum of ten people per group is maintained to favor the personalization of educational accompaniment and the construction of stable bonds.

The methodology is eminently practical, experiential and dialogic. Strategies such as problem-based learning, project-based learning, and service-learning are used.

The pace of learning is individualized, adjusting to the personal circumstances of each participant. Non-linear itineraries, irregular rhythms, and processes of abandonment and re-entry without penalty are contemplated, in accordance with the logic of inclusive educational guidance.

Pedagogical protocols include the creation of a safe, warm, and horizontal classroom climate. The teacher assumes the role of facilitator, mediator, and co-learner, renouncing any directive or authoritarian attitude. Work in small cooperative groups, shared decision-making, and absolute respect

for the times, silences, and emotional needs of the students are promoted. It works with a trauma perspective (Van der Kolk, 2015) [5] and with a human rights approach (FEANTSA, 2017) [6]. The classroom must be understood as a space for symbolic reparation and identity reconstruction, where the act of learning becomes an act of dignity.

In this sense, the proposed methodology is nourished by Paulo Freire's theory established in "Education as a practice of freedom" [7] which, focused on adult education, establishes the theoretical bases of his educational proposal. It postulates education as a tool not only for education, but also for social transformation, promoting critical reflection and action in the world, which is especially appropriate in the work of homeless people. To this end, far from turning the student/user into a storage of knowledge (banking education, something impossible when training users in street situations with a lack of confidence and other very severe issues), a liberating and inclusive education is proposed based on dialogue and participation, which seeks to empower individuals to be the active subjects in the construction of their training and their own future, but also to integrate the social environment (such as the classroom of an adult training center or the neighborhood where the user temporarily lives) in a process that involves a critical awareness of the social, cultural, and political situation. Individuals must be able to identify inequalities and injustices, and to seek ways to overcome them.

In this process, as is evident in the proposed strategy, the teacher abandons the master classes to become a guide who tutors the homeless student to develop their critical awareness and questioning of reality through the competence of learning to learn. The student is the protagonist of his or her own learning, guiding themselves in a process of personal exploration and leaving the teacher as a role of just the guide, identifier of needs, and provider of the necessary support so they can develop their potential by creating an environment of trust and respect where ideas and experiences can be shared.

This methodological proposal also draws from those of Carl Rogers (1902 - 1987), American humanist psychologist, established in "Freedom to Learn" [8] and "On Becoming a Person" [9], and based on confidence in the human potential to develop when the right conditions are met, and is framed within humanistic theories of learning.

Along with these educational theories from a social perspective, the proposed methodology is also linked to the theories of social work proposed by Marco Marchioni to convey the social integration of the user and their access to a home through the education provided [10] [11].

In summary, this methodology is based on a deep respect for the dignity, experience and time of each homeless person, recognizing that learning in conditions of exclusion is an act of resistance and hope. The classroom must be a refuge, opportunity and community. As Bell Hooks (1994) states, teaching is a deeply political and loving act, and in the case of homeless people, it can also be a form of symbolic survival.

3 RESULTS

Since the pilot tests will begin in October 2025 and will last for eight months, in this section we show the planning and description of the stages that comprise the implementation of the aforementioned methodological strategy, with the aim of showing how the entire educational process has been designed, what objectives each stage pursues, and what results are expected from its implementation with adults experiencing homelessness.

3.1 Initial stage: autonomous training and first contact with education

This is a training where homeless people are provided with simple and appealing educational materials while providing them with other services. In this first contact, users are approached for the first time by educational materials with dynamic resources that allow them to spend the long hours of the day. It will be taught by trainers from social entities and will be accompanied by mild social measures.

The objective of this first stage is to initiate a first informal and non-intimidating approach to education while covering basic needs (food, rest, hygiene, listening...), generating first ties between teacher and student where, according to the methodological axes, it is the student who autonomously develops the resources and the educational process that are also useful for their daily life.

The resources provided to homeless people are simple and equivalent to Initial Course 2, which corresponds to Initial Education (Literacy and New Readers) of basic adult education (EPA) or their equivalent in the rest of the EU countries.

Each of these resources generates specific learning situations that participants will have to manage autonomously with occasional support of the street team. It is the participant who decides when they want to make the resource, what resource they want to do and how much time they want to invest in it.

The expected result is to generate interest, a continuous contact with homeless people, the identification of skills and first competences, and the improvement of the socio-educational bond, favoring confidence in themselves and their interest in moving on to the next stage of learning.

3.2 Intermediate stage: personalized educational guidance phase

This is an informal training with a trainer from the social entity with specific training who will join the street teams, meeting with the user to talk about the resources, and structure their learning a little.

The objective of this stage is to establish a personalized tutoring process for users in street situations, promoting more effectively the development of educational skills through more structured informal training, adapted to the interests and abilities of the user, in coordination with their social care process that favors their access to Stage 3.

If in Stage 1 the street team (social workers and technicians) was basically in charge of providing the resources and advising occasionally regarding doubts the users may have to learn autonomously with the simple educational resources provided, in this Stage 2 the trainers and teachers join the street team to guide the homeless participants to create a bond and generate a better-structured and effective learning process of key competences, transversal competences, and basic knowledge, as well as generating a trusting climate.

The resources provided to homeless people are simple and equivalent to Initial Course 2, which corresponds to Initial Education (Literacy and New Readers) of basic adult education (EPA) or their equivalent in the rest of the EU countries.

3.3 Advanced stage: transition to formal adult education.

Once the student has managed to recover educational and social skills, they are guided to formal spaces (where they can also shower and groom) to receive training adapted to their level, short and with changing schedules carried out by adult education teachers and which will culminate in their integration into the regulated school.

This stage is designed in a way consistent with the curriculum of module 1 of Level I of Secondary Education for Adults (ESPA), but with a specific adaptation that answers to the needs, interests, and specific situations of homeless adults. It is comprised of didactic units articulated from practical, close, and useful learning situations, which connect with previous knowledge and with the daily reality of homeless people. This training process is carried out exclusively within social entities that work with homeless people, in order to create a realistic and accessible bridge between homelessness and access to formal training in Adult Education Centers (CEPA or their equivalent in the rest of the countries).

Contents are worked on through meaningful learning situations based on the daily reality of the participants: how to read a shelter sign, how to fill out a social assistance form, how to calculate daily expenses, how to interpret news, or how to understand a medical prescription.

It is recommended to adapt the development of each learning situation to the level, pace, and personal circumstances of the participants, in order to ensure an inclusive, understandable, and meaningful experience for the whole group.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this methodological strategy proposes an innovative and realistic path to promote the inclusion of homeless people through their access to education. We propose an itinerary in three stages that allows us to move from an approach in the street and autonomous learning, to personalized educational guidance, and finally to learning in the classroom. All of this is done so they can later access regulated adult education programs, smoothing their process of social, personal, and labor integration.

In this sense, this methodology answers to both the educational and social needs of homeless people, offering a mechanism for social, educational, and labor inclusion.

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