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Lleida, 4 y 5 Julio 2019

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**Educación: La puerta a toda mejora social**

## Multi-actor perspectives on successful and inclusive socio-educational practices: Overcoming school failure and dropout in Portugal

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Abstract: Project "EDUPLACES: Practices, voices and pathways of inclusive education" seeks to identify, characterise and discuss socio-educational practices aimed at overcoming school failure and dropout. Teachers/professionals, parents, children/young people and institutional partners engaged in ten practices, located in four Portuguese municipalities, participated in interviews (10) and focus groups (37). Cross-analysis produced relevant results pertaining to the practices' location, basis (school or community organisation) and philosophy (student grouping, study support, mediation or pedagogical differentiation). Additionally, it revealed some differences between groups of participants: individual change is an outcome more predominantly identified by parents and children/young people; teachers/professionals frequently address successful approaches to school-family-community interactions; partners express a generally positive outlook on the practices, instead of focusing on barriers.

Keywords: School failure, School dropout, Inclusive education, Socio-educational practices, Qualitative research

### 1. Objectives:

An in-depth multi-case study of ten socio-educational inclusive practices, project "EDUPLACES/Educating Places: Practices, voices and pathways of inclusive education" (PTDC/MHC-CED/3775/2014), expanding from June 2016 to November 2019, engages the efforts of 18 researchers, from four Portuguese universities. Each practice is developed under one of two national intervention programmes (one school-based and one community-based), aimed at social inclusion and overcoming school failure and dropout. The ten practices take place in as many different contexts and four municipalities.

This project highlights the points of view of the actors engaged in socio-educational practices identified as successful, and proposes to answer two main research questions: 1) which processes and factors potentiate the development of inclusive socio-educational practices; and 2) which processes and factors support the interruption of the downward spiral of school failure and dropout, and favour the remobilisation of young people towards learning and educational success. In this paper, we will begin by establishing a theoretical-epistemological framework based on the discussion of the barriers to access to, and participation in, education. Next, we shall refer to the methodological pathway, with a particular

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focus on the process supporting the construction of the Monographies of Practices (Year II). Outcomes from a preliminary cross-analysis of the voices of teachers/professionals, parents, children/young people and institutional partners will be presented and discussed. Finally, we will expand on the potential impacts of this research, namely in terms of policy recommendations.

## 2. Theoretical Framework:

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School failure and dropout are well known as processes beginning, in some cases, even before school entry, resulting from the interaction between individual, institutional, contextual, family-related and school-related causes and processes. School alienation is frequently used as a generic concept that, in a way, leaves out much of the complexity of these processes (Ferguson et al. 2005; Dale 2010; Costa et al. 2013; Vallee 2017). Research on inclusion has also pointed out the relevance of community-based local strategies as the framework for change within the school (Abellán 2016; Hargreaves, Boyle and Harris 2014; Fullan and Boyle 2014; Flecha and Soler 2013; Hargreaves and Shirley 2012).

In its analysis of socio-educational practices aimed at overcoming school failure and dropout, EDUPLACES sets itself apart from previous research endeavours in two main aspects: on one hand, it focuses on the voices of the actors directly engaged in said practices, exploring the points of view, experiences and expectations of teachers/professionals, parents, children/young people and institutional partners; on the other hand, it discusses previously under-analysed dimensions of these socio-educational practices: the local dimension and the innovative dimension. In this sense, the project also proposes a discussion about how these so-called successful practices contribute to the empowerment and the inclusion of marginalised groups, which is also a discussion about education as an instrument for social justice (Singh, 2015) and equity (Balsera et al, 2016).

Analysing these practices aimed at overcoming school failure and dropout is, in that sense, a discussion about the barriers or obstacles posed to the participation of children/young people, families and communities in school.

In order to understand the socio-educational practices under study, a framework discussing the barriers to access and participation on education provides conceptual tools to explore some analytical dimensions. In this literature, barriers are understood as 'factors that serve to exclude (...) from participation' in formal education (Ekstrom 1972: 1). The typology more frequently mobilised in these studies includes *institutional barriers* (internal to institutions, such as 'admissions and financial aid practices, regulations, adopted types of curriculum and services, and faculty and staff attitudes'), *situational barriers* (related to some specific life situations of the individuals, including sociocultural expectations and pressures, or family and work responsibilities) and *dispositional barriers* (such as some feelings or perspectives, built upon individual and collective past social experience, from

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fear of failure or feelings of alienation, attitude towards intellectual activity or educational goals, to the subjects' educational aspirations and expectations).

### 3. Methodology:

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EDUPLACES is a research project based on a multi-case study of ten (eleven in the first year) units of observation (UO), developed throughout three phases/years. Each UO consists of an inclusive socio-educational practice developed in the context of two national programmes (one school-based and one community-based) aimed at social inclusion and overcoming school failure and dropout. The selection of these two programmes was the first step in selecting the inclusive socio-educational practices under study. They are the longest lasting governmental interventions on school failure and dropout (both have been in force for over fifteen years), and both refer to vulnerable and disadvantaged territories/populations, and involve school and community relationships. It is the research team's decision not to disclose the names of these programmes. Practice selection was based on two criteria: ease of access (namely, availability of information) and results (outcomes are published regularly, as a requirement for continued funding).

In the first year of research, the eleven socio-educational practices were identified as successful by their institutional coordinators. This data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Simultaneously, a documental analysis was developed, contemplating the available information on each initiative and overall on the two programmes, in an effort to triangulate data. This phase was supported by two fundamental data aggregation and analysis instruments: a *Selection Criteria Grid* and a *Descriptive Note*. While the former had the purpose of ensuring that the initiative(s) corresponded to a definition of "inclusive socio-educational practice", the latter systematised a set of characterization data.

In the second year of research, data was collected from teachers/professionals, parents, children/young people and institutional partners engaging in the practices under study. Different instruments were used, considering each practice's specificities: in this paper, we will focus on the data stemming from interviews (10) and focus groups (37), wherein over 100 subjects participated. The gathered set of information was the basis for the construction of ten Monographies of Practices. These include (for each practice) a description of the practice, narrative summaries of the actors' voices and an analysis of the practice that integrates a discussion about equal opportunities in access to knowledge, as well as expectations, needs and problems. Another outcome of the second year of research is an ongoing draft of a Typology of Practices.

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#### 4. Discussion of Data, Evidence and Objects or Materials:

In this paper, we will present and discuss the outcomes of a cross-analysis of 47 sources, distributed as follows:

| Location          | Interviews                                 | Focus Groups  |
|-------------------|--|---|
| <u>North</u>      |  | Teachers/professionals: 5<br>Parents: 4<br>Children/young people: 3<br>Partners: 3<br><br>TOTAL: 15 |
| <u>North-east</u> |  | Teachers/professionals: 2<br>Parents: 2<br>Children/young people: 3<br><br>TOTAL: 7                 |
| <u>North-west</u> | Parents: 9<br>Partners: 1<br><br>TOTAL: 10 | Teachers/professionals: 2<br>Parents: 1<br>Children/young people: 3<br>Partners: 2<br><br>TOTAL: 8  |
| <u>South</u>      |  | Teachers/professionals: 3<br>Parents: 2<br>Children/young people: 2<br><br>TOTAL: 7                 |
| <b>TOTAL</b>      | <b>10</b>                                  | <b>37</b>   |

These 47 transcripts were coded in NVivo, according to an *a priori* list ('tree') of categories, comprised of 22 items: five parent nodes (or categories) and seventeen child nodes (or subcategories). The basis for the category tree was the theoretical framework and the research question framing this phase of the project: which factors/processes, rationales and partnerships most contribute to overcoming (institutional/sociocultural, situational and dispositional) barriers to participation in school and learning, and promote transformation (Ekstrom, 1972; Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998; Roosmaa & Saar, 2017). Because of this, the research team felt the need to further decompose the subcategories: those pertaining to institutional, situational and dispositional dimensions are (generally) subdivided into *barriers* and *processes aimed at overcoming barriers*; subcategory "The quality of learning" is subdivided into *Pedagogical quality*, *Scientific quality* and *Absence of quality – barriers to learning*.

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Considering the entirety of sources, the frequency count is as follows:

| Category                                   | Subcategory  | Number of references | Sources |
|--|--|----------------------|---------|
| 1. Institutional dimensions                | 1.1. Pedagogy, curriculum and evaluation   | <b>438</b>           | 41      |
|  | 1.2. Student participation   | 115                  | 32      |
|  | 1.3. The quality of learning   | <b>168</b>           | 29      |
|  | 1.4. Expectations  | 122                  | 30      |
|  | 1.5. Interinstitutional support and work   | 52                   | 31      |
| 2. Dispositional dimensions                | 2.1. Stability of the intervention teams   | 112                  | 34      |
|  | 2.2. Pupil role  | 137                  | 32      |
|  | 2.3. Pupil craft   | 135                  | 35      |
|  | 2.4. Pre-requisites of professional life   | 17                   | 10      |
| 3. Situational dimensions                  | 3.1. Communication, translation, negotiation and interaction between school-families-communities | <b>317</b>           | 40      |
|  | 3.2. Persons of reference  | 35                   | 17      |
| 4. Changes, transformations and innovation | 4.1. Institutional changes   | 64                   | 18      |
|  | 4.2. Group changes   | 58                   | 17      |
|  | 4.3. Individual changes  | 118                  | 33      |
|  | 4.4. Suggestions for the improvement of practices  | 62                   | 24      |
| 5. Partnerships                            | 5.1. Barriers  | 16                   | 8       |
|  | 5.2. Processes to overcome barriers  | 49                   | 14      |

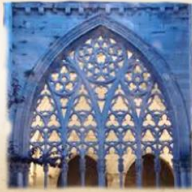
At the macro level, it is clear that the discourses tend to focus on the discussion of institutional aspects of the practices under study, and namely what refers to their pedagogical and curricular orientations, as well as their assessment processes. However, communicational aspects are the second most frequently mentioned. A sectional analysis of this data, considering the nature of the practices under study, their location, their institutional basis and the different types of actors offers some interesting insights into what constitutes a successful and inclusive socio-educational practice.

## 5. Results and/or conclusions:

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As an outcome of the first year of research, and in an effort to make an initial systematisation of the set of practices under study, these were grouped into **types**, according to their main focus and/or approach: Study Support (4 practices, one in each region); Student Grouping (2 practices: 1 in the North and 1 in the North-east); Mediation (3 practices: 2 in the North and 1 in the North-west); Pedagogic Differentiation (1 practice, in the South). Pedagogy, curriculum and evaluation (1.1) is the most frequent subcategory in every type of practice; communication (3.1) is the second most frequent in every type of practice except for the Pedagogical Differentiation practice, for which learning connected with the Pupil craft (2.3) is the second most frequently mentioned.

When looking at the data in terms of the practices' **location**, the general framework is maintained. However, while 3.1 is the second most mentioned subcategory in every group of practices, dispositional dimensions (category 2) are more relevant than situational dimensions (category 3) in the discourses of the actors engaged in practices located in the North-east, North-west and South. Considering the **institutional basis** of the practices – whether they are developed in the context of a school-based or a community-based project –, 1.1 and 3.1 remain the two most frequent subcategories. However, for school-based practices, 2.3 is the third most frequent subcategory, and dispositional dimensions appear as generally more relevant than situational dimensions. For community-based practices, the learning connected with the Pupil role (2.2) is the third most frequent subcategory, while conversely situational dimensions (category 3) appear as generally more relevant than dispositional dimensions (category 2).

Finally, considering the four **types of actors** surveyed, teachers/professionals focus on the pedagogical, curricular and evaluative aspects of the practices under study (1.1), with situational dimensions (category 3) and particularly communication (3.1) coming in second. Considerations about the quality of learning (1.3) – particularly pedagogical quality (1.3.1), but also the absence of quality (1.3.3) – come in third. For parents, on the other hand, communication (3.1) is clearly the most relevant aspect of the practices, with far more references to processes aimed at overcoming barriers pertaining to communication (3.1.2) than to barriers (3.1.1). This generally positive outlook on the impact these practices have had is reinforced by the number of mentions to individual changes (4.3), the third most frequent subcategory. Children/young people also tend to report mainly the pedagogical, curricular and evaluative aspects of these practices (1.1), while learning connected with the Pupil craft (2.3) is the second most frequently mentioned subcategory. Amongst partners, prevails a generally positive outlook on the practices' impact and on their role as such: *processes aimed at overcoming barriers related to partnerships* (5.2) is the most frequent subcategory; *processes aimed at overcoming barriers related to communication* (3.1.2) is the second; *processes aimed at overcoming barriers related to pedagogy, curriculum and evaluation* is the third.

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## 6. Contributions and Scientific importance of this work:

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Cluster analysis has allowed for the emergence of interesting similarities between apparently unrelated sources: for instance, children/young people in the North-western region and parents in the Northern region seem to share an outlook on their respective practices, with the former exclusively mentioning *processes aimed at overcoming barriers related to expectations/positive expectations* and the latter exclusively mentioning *barriers to expectations/negative expectations*. The issue of expectations – namely, whose expectations, needs and problems these practices respond to – requires further exploration.

For Student Grouping practices, references to *barriers* in terms of pedagogy, curriculum and evaluation surpass references to *processes aimed at overcoming barriers*, meaning that the actors view these practices as somewhat problematic. The same may be true for the Pedagogic Differentiation practice, with significant references to the *absence of quality/barriers to learning*. This elicits further discussion about what constitutes a good/successful practice.

That even for institutional partners references to the importance of partnerships are only the fourth most frequent speaks to the mainly centralised (particularly school-centric) management and development of these practices. This seems to be further confirmed by how apparently irrelevant learning aimed at acquiring competences that promote professional integration and/or lifelong learning (2.4) is (e.g. VET, curricular integration of the academic and professional components, job search tools and procedures, etc.).

In the same sense, it seems that the issue of student participation (and, in a broader sense, of citizenship education) will require specific attention in upcoming analysis. Are these practices training children and young people exclusively to perform the pupil role/pupil craft (Apple & King, 1977; King, 1982; Perrenoud, 1995)? If so, what are the sustained impacts of these practices in the lives of children/young people faced with school failure and dropout? The analysis of Atypical Educational Pathways (March – November 2019) may offer some insight into what were key-factors in reversing negative trajectories.

## 7. Acknowledgements:

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The data presented in this paper is the outcome of the joint work of the EDUPLACES research team: Fátima Antunes (coord.), Almerindo J. Afonso, Armando Loureiro, Carlos Gomes, Emília Vilarinho, Esmeraldina Veloso, Fátima L. Carvalho, Isabel Costa, Isabel Menezes, Joana Lúcio, José Augusto Palhares, José Pedro Amorim, Manuel António Silva, Marta Rodrigues, Raquel R. Monteiro, Rosanna Barros, Tiago Neves and Virgínio Sá.

This research is funded by National Funds through FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology (Portugal), in the context of project PTDC/MHC-CED/3775/2014. This research is funded by CIEd – Research Centre on Education, project

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UID/CED/01661/2019, Institute of Education, University of Minho, through national funds of FCT/MCTES-PT.

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