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Overcoming Barriers: The Local and the Innovative Dimensions of Inclusive Socio-Educational Practices

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Abstract

This paper discusses some results of a broader research, focusing on a set of eleven socio-educational practices aiming to overcome school failure and dropout, developed in Portugal, giving particular attention to the local and innovative dimensions. This research aims to understand the point of view of the several actors involved, about which factors, processes and relationships contribute the most to building such practices. Data was gathered through documental analysis and semi-structured interviews with those (institutionally) responsible for each practice under study and was analyzed using two instruments. From the point of view of the people responsible, the practices that contribute the most to overcoming school failure and dropout fall into one of four categories: Study Support (4 Practices), Student Grouping (3), Mediation (3) and Pedagogical Differentiation (1). Some practices mobilize resources; others interfere with learning and life contexts, in order to confront institutional, situational and dispositional barriers to participation and learning. Those practices seem to have an impact on school-family communication. Formal schooling, as well as the socio-cultural inclusion of youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, are seen as relevant; yet, we can observe a somewhat fragile involvement of families and communities in practices aimed at promoting their youth's educational success.

Keywords: socio-educational practices; school failure and dropout; place-based education; barriers to school participation and learning

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Superando Barreras. Las Dimensiones Locales e Innovadoras de Prácticas Socioeducativas Inclusivas

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Resumen

Este texto analiza algunos resultados de una investigación más amplia, centrada en un conjunto de once prácticas socioeducativas destinadas a superar el fracaso y el abandono escolar, desarrolladas en Portugal, prestando especial atención a las dimensiones locales e innovadoras. Su objetivo es comprender el punto de vista de los diversos actores involucrados, acerca de qué factores, procesos y relaciones contribuyen más a la construcción de tales prácticas. Los datos se recopilaban mediante análisis documental y entrevistas semiestructuradas con los responsables (institucionalmente) de cada práctica, y se analizaron utilizando dos instrumentos. Para las personas responsables, las prácticas que más contribuyen a superar el fracaso escolar y el abandono escolar se dividen en una de cuatro categorías: Apoyo al estudio (4 prácticas), Agrupación de estudiantes (3), Mediación (3) y Diferenciación pedagógica (1). Algunas prácticas movilizan recursos; otros interfieren con el aprendizaje y los contextos de la vida, para enfrentar las barreras institucionales, situacionales y disposicionales a la participación y el aprendizaje. Esas prácticas parecen tener un impacto en la comunicación entre la escuela y la familia. La escolarización formal, así como la inclusión sociocultural de jóvenes de entornos desfavorecidos, se consideran relevantes; sin embargo, se puede observar una participación algo frágil de las familias y las comunidades en las prácticas destinadas a promover el éxito educativo de sus jóvenes

Palabras clave: prácticas socioeducativas; fracaso escolar y deserción escolar; educación basada en el lugar; barreras a la participación escolar y al aprendizaje.



School failure and dropout became an educational and socio-political issue in a context wherein school asserted itself as *an institution for the socialization of the species* (Candeias, 2009), as it expanded its action across virtually every country in the world and every child and young person (and adult) in each country, during an increasingly long period of the life cycle (Ramirez & Boli, 1987; Perrenoud, 2000). The European Union, in the Education & Training 2010 Programme (Council of the European Union, 2002) adopted the benchmark of no more than 10% of young people dropping out of school early. In this framework, school failure and dropout acquired a higher socio-political, academic, scientific and educational priority, visibility and centrality, even if with some specificity according to each country's historical and institutional background. Portugal is one of the EU state-members with higher levels of early school leaving and the one that most significantly reduced these scores over the past decades (European Commission, 2018). Social cohesion and democratization, educational inclusion (that is, school participation and learning) constitute parameters to guide policies and socio-educational practices aiming to overcome school failure and dropout. Nevertheless, the scientific, academic and educational knowledge and debate leave significant room, and challenge researchers to question the theoretical and empirical grounds of such policies and practices and to discuss their contribution to our understanding of educational processes.

The first part of this paper mobilizes some theoretical perspectives to understand and characterize the practices under study; next, we present some methodological information about the definition of the observation field, and the data gathering and analysis procedures and instruments; the third part is reserved for data presentation, interpretation and discussion; finally, we present some remarks based on the theoretical questioning of empirical data, and put forward some interrogations suggested by this discussion for next steps of research.

Theoretical Framework

As many countries across the world, and namely within the European Union, Portugal has, since the 1980s, been the stage of a series of policies,

programmes and practices developed with the purpose of overcoming school failure and dropout. Consecutive national and international assessments on these issues highlighted a contextual and diverse appropriation and reconstruction of said policies; the teachers' perspectives about students; and the multiple rationales underlying their conception and implementation (Canário, Alves & Rolo, 2001). More recently, an external evaluation highlighted how one of the previously mentioned programmes contributed to reducing dropout and grade retention in participating schools, even though subsequent data raises some uncertainty regarding the latter aspect (Figueiredo et al., 2013). Another researcher argued in favor of the positive effects of said programme in reducing dropout rates, detecting a more modest effect on student's academic outcomes, assessed through their results on national exams (Dias, 2013). Yet another study raised equally relevant questions about the scope of the results of such educational policies (Neves, Ferraz & Nata, 2016).

However, the factors influencing 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). There is research about the policies, programmes and practices aimed at these socio-educational problems (Frandsen et al., 2009; Ross, 2009; Dale, 2010; Rochex, 2011; Raffo, Dyson & Keer, 2014) and there is knowledge about successful practices in preventing and/or overcoming school failure and dropout (UB/CREA & UM/UEA, 2006; Ross, 2009; Edwards & Downes, 2013; Flecha/Include-Ed Consortium, 2015). 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 & Harris, 2014; Fullan & Boyle, 2014; Flecha & Soler, 2013; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012).

This paper explores two specific dimensions of socio-educational inclusive practices: a) what new approaches is it possible to identify, in terms of resource management, partnerships, audiences, formats of participation, strategies to assess success and dissemination networks, and

b) what is the local community's role in the development, implementation and evaluation of these socio-educational practices/initiatives.

Barriers to Participation in School Learning and Education

In order to understand the socio-educational practices studied, 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, p. 1). The typology more frequently mobilized in these studies includes institutional barriers (internal to institutions, as ‘admissions practices, financial aid practices, institutional regulations, types of curriculum and services adopted, 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 (as some feelings or perspectives, build by individual and collective past social experience, from fear of failure or sense of alienation, attitude toward intellectual activity or educational goals to level of educational aspirations and expectations of the subjects). These diverse influences may act in multiple ways, empirically apprehended, from variable complex interaction to certain independence (ibid, 2; Osam, Bergman & Cumberland, 2017).

Those empirical categories can be related with more theoretical concepts elaborated and well known in the social scientific knowledge or sociology of education landscape. Long and Mejia (2016) discussed an enlarged version of institutional barriers to under-represented minorities in engineering higher education courses, attributing centrality to the triad: ‘deficit-based thinking’, ‘low expectations’, poor intellectual stimulation and ‘academic guidance and counseling’ (Keddie, 1980; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Gomes, 1987). The indifference to inequalities of material, informative or emotional resources and conditions; ‘restrictive (...) curricula’ and ‘an insufficient number of diverse institutional and societal role models’ amount to those ‘factors that serve to exclude’ (Ekstrom, 1972, p. 1) several underrepresented categories from participation in education (Long & Mejía, 2016, p. 3-6).

A research about inequality in Higher Education ‘identified three principal barriers facing working-class students: economic, social and cultural, and educational’, considering them as economic, institutional/educational and cultural ‘constraints’ (Lynch & O’Riordan, 1998, p. 445 and ff.). The institutional/educational barriers are discussed by those authors in terms of cultural clash and discontinuities between curriculum, teacher and working class students cultural references and way of life; they bring to the forefront the interpretation of those differences in terms of cultural deficit and the implications of those interpretations on teachers expectations and perspectives about the future and social destinations of students (ibid, 465 and ff.).

So, the meaning of school work or the students’craft (Perrenoud, 1995) needs to be built by the learning subjects. And the standardized learning, curricular and school pathways (in terms of fixed units of pupils grouping, learning contents, rhythm or sequence) (Perrenoud, 2000; Bernstein, 1996) that characterize the Portuguese regular basic school constitutes strong institutional barriers to the participation and/or learning of some underrepresented or recent-comers/first generation (as Roma, rural, fisherman or other particularly poor or working class youngsters) audiences (UB/CREA & UM/UEA 2006; Sá & Antunes, 2012; Antunes & Sá, 2014). This framework seems relevant when analyzing the factors or relationships that, according to the people responsible, contribute to building successful educational practices: it provides conceptual tools to explore which (institutional, situational or dispositional) barriers are those practices oriented to confront and eventually surpass or mitigate.

Processes for Overcoming Participation Barriers: The Local and the Inovative Dimensions of the Practices

As a whole, the research project that frames this paper is concerned with addressing two main questions: (i) which processes and factors contribute to building local inclusive socio-educational practices, and (ii) which processes and factors interrupt the negative spiral of school failure and dropout, and favor the remobilization of young people towards learning and building successful academic pathways. While a multitude of approaches

seem valid to discuss these two aspects of overcoming school failure and dropout, this paper focuses on two main analytical frameworks:

- (1) The “innovative” dimension, identifying, characterizing and discussing innovative elements in terms of strategies, partnerships and/or audiences covered by these socio-educational practices, and
- (2) The “local” dimension, discussing the links that said practices establish with the territories in which they are implemented, in an effort to unveil the conditions allowing the emergence of learning communities and communities of practice.

As we seek to clarify these dimensions, we are contributing for the ‘construction of a cognitive referential and a conception of social and political action concerned with a rehabilitation of the “local” and the “communitarian” which confers centrality to the peripheries’ (Correia & Caramelo, 2003, p. 169).

When we discuss educational territories, ‘local construction of education’, local or community development, area-based initiatives (Rhodes, Tyler & Brennan, 2003; McCulloch, 2004; Power, Rees & Taylor, 2005; Rhodes, Tyler & Brennan, 2005; Lawless, 2006) in the educational field, place-based education (Ford, 2005; Smith, 2005; Coughlin & Kirch, 2010; Resor, 2010) or even when we refer to the idea of a ‘critical pedagogy of place’ (Ruitenbergh, 2005; Stevenson, 2008), we establish, in line with Ferreira (2005), ‘that the study of the local in Education implies recognizing that the local is not just the place and that education is not just the school’, so as to include ‘the synergies between formal, non-formal and informal modes of education; (...) the educational and training dimensions of integrated local development processes; the association contexts of participation, solidarity and citizenship’ (Ferreira, 2005, p. 20).

The concept of ‘social innovation’ – referring broadly to innovative strategies to answer to a certain community’s social needs (Moulaert et al., 2013) – is featured in some of the founding legislation for both national programmes framing the eleven socio-educational inclusive practices discussed in this paper. Nonetheless, both programmes have been on the field for over fifteen years, which means that some of these initiatives have

had several ‘incarnations’, i.e. they have been developed in the same context and/or by more or less the same teams and/or for the same audiences in successive editions of said programmes. With that in mind, it may be relevant to question whether or not one can still shed a problematizing eye over the territory, potentiating the definition of new intervention areas/strategies, the pursuit of new resources or the setting up of new partnerships. On the other hand, one must also consider a certain ‘contamination’: given the public nature of much of the documentation produced on these initiatives, but also due to the programmes’ own investment in dissemination, it is expectable that different projects may be mutually inspired.

While it may be difficult to identify innovation at that level, in initiatives such as those analysed by this research project, it is certainly possible to identify social innovation as defined by Moulaert, MacCallum and Hillier (2013), i.e. the promotion of ‘inclusion and well-being through the improvement of social relations and “empowerment” processes’ (Moulaert, MacCallum & Hillier 2013, p. 14). Part of that improvement in social relations (whether within school or in the broader context of the community) is a shift in power relations, that is, a transformation in terms of the democratic quality of decision-making processes. In that sense, an analysis of the innovative dimension of such practices will necessarily have to feature a discussion about the platforms and formats of participation available to the relevant (individual and institutional) actors, both in terms of planning and in terms of executing these initiatives. Ultimately, it is important to discuss whether said participation unfolds in a logic closer to ‘governance’ – where those who decide consult, cooperate with, establish/foster partnerships, acknowledge the stakeholders and define spaces-times for deliberation – or one closer to co-construction, where the feedback from the teams engaged in these socio-educational initiatives comes to inform policy development and service creation (Klein et al., 2013).

The analysis of data gathered through the two instruments mobilized during the first phase of the project’s fieldwork (Selection Criteria Grid and Descriptive Note) produced some relevant outcomes for the discussion about the ‘local’ and the ‘innovative’ dimension of inclusive socio-

educational practices (from the point of view of those responsible), which we will explore further on.

Methodology

Eduplaces is a research project based on a multi-case study of eleven units of observation, developed throughout three phases/years, by a team of fifteen researchers. Each unit of observation 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 eleven practices take place in as many different contexts and four municipalities, three in the North and one in the South of the country.

Practice selection was based on two criteria: ease of access (namely, availability of information) and results. The results were appreciated on two grounds:

(1) For the community-based programme, each of the selected projects placed in the upper tier for the programme's 2016-2018 funding application (35,6% approval rate): four of the five projects were in place since 2010, and had been selected for a third round of funding; the fifth one had initiated a year prior and placed first in said application; three projects had a 'global rate of school success' higher than the programme's average (74%), while the fourth scored 73%;

(2) For the school-based programme, each of the six selected projects had, according to the programme's report for 2014-2015, received the following formal assessment: 'in 2014-15, [name of school group] successfully Reached / Exceeded the general goals.

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.

Eduplaces' first phase was also supported by two fundamental data aggregation and analysis instruments: a Selection Criteria Grid and a Descriptive Note.

The 22 descriptive-analytical synopses (i.e. eleven Grids and eleven Notes) supported the construction of the Portfolio of Practices. The information gathered was fully categorized and triangulated, incorporating data stemming from a broader set of documental data pertaining to each practice, by an 'external' element – a Research Fellow, who had not had direct contact with the people responsible for each practice, nor had undertaken first-hand data gathering.

The *Grid* held a set of 25 selection criteria, organized into four themes: "Positive Expectations and Participant Appreciation"; "Strengthening of Meaningful Links and Democratic Processes"; "Curricular and Organizational Flexibility and Openness to Career Opportunities"; and, finally, "Monitoring/Evaluation and Consolidated Practices". The eleven Grids were statistically analyzed, which allowed for the production of a cross-sectional look over these inclusive socio-educational practices, as well as some particular insights.

The *Note* held a set of thirteen descriptive items, in an effort to account for the main features of each practice. The eleven Notes were equally submitted to a content analysis. Out of the thirteen items, six were considered for the purpose of this transversal analysis, as they were seen as those that would potentiate a global understanding of the eleven practices: focus, main objective, main contribution, type of argument supporting the selection of the practice, specific institutional links/articulation efforts, and specific links to the context.

Discussion

A First Look at Overcoming School Failure and Dropout: Responding to Barriers, Interfering with Contexts and Learning, Mobilizing Resources

This research is founded in the principle that inclusive socio-educational practices (set to overcome school failure and dropout) share a common ground with some of the processes and dynamics that support institutional, collective and individual change. These unfold in social contexts with particular conditions and resources. The commonalities and singularities of these practices can be apprehended through multi-case studies, multi-actor perspectives, and individual and collective narratives. From our analysis, the eleven practices under study can be categorized as follows: four practices of Study Support; three practices of Student Grouping (with relative homogeneity); three practices of Mediation; and one practice of Pedagogic Differentiation.

Study Support practices mobilize and organize added resources, in order to promote learning and the improvement of weaker academic performances. The majority of these practices are framed by the community-based programme, so they take place outside of school, but in close articulation with it, focusing on: support in solving homework, preparing for tests, guidance for school projects, as well as the promotion of autonomous studying, stress management (related to assessment events), individual responsibility, self-organization, etc. An international research underlined that practices such as those “are intended to reinforce the academic content taught in the classroom. Such activities were found to be especially important for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with disabilities” (Flecha/Include-Ed Consortium, 2015, p. 37).

Student Grouping practices take place in school-based initiatives, consisting of arranging students into relatively homogenous groups (in terms of academic outcomes), therefore seeking to render pedagogical action more efficient. In some cases, student grouping takes place for specific subjects (e.g. native language and mathematics) but not for others, while in other cases students are placed in separate classrooms entirely (not

only for all subjects within that school year, but also throughout several school years).

Mediation practices generate and support negotiation and proximity processes amongst school actors and students/families. These interfere with power relations, and situations/meanings that are unbalanced, complex and multifaceted. In some cases, mediation practices are described as itinerant (in the sense that they interact with other practices, summon several intervention agents, and act mostly at a communicational level). In another case, mediation is a specific body within the school, wherein teachers and other professionals articulate amongst themselves and with the outside (families, governmental services, etc.).

The Pedagogic Differentiation practice focuses on the first two years of compulsory education, with the purpose of pinpointing learning difficulties early on, and mobilizing resources in order to overcome them. Additional structures, procedures and instruments to support the individual progress of certain students are then put into place. The differentiation of learning paths can unfold under the teacher's guidance, within the classroom and in the context of regular class activities, or, when necessary, with the support of an additional teacher and in a separate space (in addition to regular class activities).

These are, as a whole, systemic strategies (De Witte et al., 2013), in the sense that they seek to reorganize and interfere with the contexts in which the children and young people who are their target-subjects live, act and interact with school and learning, by mobilizing resources (teachers, more learning time and different learning activities, intellectual stimulation or emotional support) and other formats of educational response. In this sense, they are aimed towards mitigating or overcoming the interactive and cumulative factors and conditions that progressively weaken young people's academic and social commitment with school (Salvà-Mut, Oliver-Trobat & Comas-Forgas, 2014, pp. 134, 138, 140), and they can be referenced to the school's responses to diversity, typified as features of the compensatory school (1950s and 1960s) (Balbín, 2016, p. 3-5). The majority (7) of these interventions targets the school, certain aspects of its organization or its relationship with families and communities, while the four Study Support practices, aimed at students individually, are in a way

focused on compensating pedagogy deficits (Bernstein, 1996, p. 295). In some cases, strategies of a more programmatic nature (De Witte et al., 2013) are developed, aimed at influencing students' behaviors, attitudes and values, particularly involving the construction of psychosocial skills for self-control and interaction (certain dimensions and components additional to Study Support practices).

In terms of the school's response to diversity, Student Grouping and Study Support practices would mostly fit into a category associated with compensatory school (emerging in the 1950s-1960s), with 'attention to diversity (...) part-time support system; flexible groupings; individual development programmes; individual teaching techniques' (Balbín, 2016, p. 3-5). Certain Mediation practices, as well as the Pedagogic Differentiation practice, are able to combine responses associated with this reference and others inscribed in the modes of treating diversity subscribed by the integrating school (1970s) ('a common school for different children (...) team work as the corner stone') or the inclusive school ('special attention to groups and people with the greatest risk of exclusion; school-family interaction and school's openness to the community'). Certain modalities of Student Grouping can also be inscribed in the modes of treating diversity subscribed by the selective school, which 'segregates students who do not follow the 'normal' pace' (Balbín, 2016, p. 3-5).

These socio-educational practices develop processes and components oriented to mitigate or overcome a large panel of institutional barriers to participation and learning, like the standardization of learning, curriculum, schooling pathways, the cultural clash and the discontinuity between curriculum, teacher and students' cultural references. Some Mediation Practices work to overcome dispositional barriers like the hostility and alienation experienced by Roma children when interacting with the context of formal schooling. These Mediation Practices, developed in the framework of community-based projects, are oriented to overcome social, cultural and situational (community expectations and pressures) barriers by supporting the communication, mutual acknowledgement and confidence between teachers and young people and their families, in order to alleviate the clash between Roma culture (and way of life) and the need, for both boys and girls (but particularly the latter), to stay in school after puberty.

Study Support practices are guided by a concern to contribute to building some basic conditions related to the exercise of the student's craft (Perrenoud, 1995), such as regular class attendance, doing homework or preparing for tests and other kinds of assessment.

Changing Socio-Educational Relationships? Interacting or Working with Families and Communities: The Fragile Connection

As previously mentioned, the transversal analysis of data offered some results contributing for a discussion about the 'local' and the 'innovative' dimensions of inclusive socio-educational practices. Three of the selection criteria seem particularly relevant to discuss the innovative quality of these socio-educational practices. All three register a significant frequency (10 out of 11), which seems to suggest that fostering trust in intervention teams, the transformation of socio-educational relationships and the promotion of these practices' scientific-pedagogic and democratic quality are particularly relevant aspects of these socio-educational practices, which seem significantly innovative. Nonetheless, and considering the Descriptive Notes, only one person responsible explicitly summons innovation as an argument for the initiative's success. The singularities of the adopted pedagogic model, and its specific implementation strategies, are summoned as a reason for electing a practice (as the most successful and/or most representative) in four of the selected practices. The opening and/or strengthening of communication and cooperation channels emerges as a main contribution in four of the selected practices. Aside from the impact these practices seem to have in the development of institutional articulation efforts, some impact is also noticeable as far as socio-educational relations are concerned, namely in what refers to school-family communication, the relative importance given to schooling/formal education and the socio-cultural inclusion of children/young people living in socioeconomically vulnerable conditions.

Three of the selection criteria seem particularly relevant for the discussion about the local dimension of these socio-educational practices, i.e. the links that they establish with the contexts in which they develop.

Out of these three, only the first (criterion 10) registered a frequency higher than the average, which seems to indicate that the creation of specific times, spaces and procedures that foment the interaction with the parents/families and communities is a relevant aspect of these socio-educational practices. The low frequency registered by the other two criteria seems to suggest that there is still significant work to do in promoting actual participation and collaborative work between these practices and the local context. Considering the Descriptive Notes, “articulated and collaborative work” and the “opening and/or strengthening of communication and cooperation channels” jointly emerge as the main contribution for the success in eight of the studied practices; nonetheless, “networking/collaborative work” is at the core of the argument for the practice’s success in only two of the practices. It is important to note that the perceived impact a given practice has on children and young people’s progress in learning, and the importance that the families acknowledge in such practices, is at the core of the argument developed by the people responsible for five of the selected practices. Families’ engagement is mentioned as a link to the context in six of the selected practices (four school-based and two community-based). In one of these cases (community-based), said engagement is materialized in the promotion of an interaction based on proximity and trust between the practice’s professionals and the children/young people’s families. In another case (school-based), an actual participation and implication of the families in the activities developed within the practice is invoked. In yet another (school-based) case, the practice’s role in fomenting school-family communication is mentioned. This data seems to corroborate the somewhat fragile engagement of children/young people’s families in practices aimed at promoting their educational success, regardless of how often this dimension emerges in the discourses of the people responsible for these practices.

The interaction with the local, and namely with the community, appears to be very much done from a perspective of deficit. Criteria 2 (“Values the individuals/communities’ abilities, likes/preferences and experiential resources – instead of deficits – as a strategy to motivate participants”) applied to seven of the 11 practices under study, despite a low average score (2,73 out of 5). From the analysis of the item “Focus”, it appears that

these practices are aimed towards intervention with students with learning difficulties and/or from (socio-culturally, economically, etc.) vulnerable backgrounds. Links to the neighborhood and openness towards the community are invoked in the discourses of the people responsible, but they seem fragile. As for partnerships (articulation between various types of organizations, at the local/organizational level and/or including governmental entities), mentioned by the people responsible for six of the eleven practices, further information is necessary, in order to understand: a) what is their operational level, and b) what is their relevance for a given practice (considering that not all members of a consortium contribute equally to a given project's several dimensions).

Closing Remarks

This paper explores a set of research hypothesis: a) that the relevance of the territory's role in these initiatives is connected with the contribution of schools, associations, companies and other local organizations, not only as spectators, but rather as active, critical and creative co-authors of the unfolding educational project; b) that, from the point of view of the actors involved in these practices, the territorial bond is an asset; c) that the stability of the intervention teams is crucial for the soundness of the implemented innovations; and finally d) that the initiatives perceived as the most innovative are strongly connected with the sphere of social interactions, namely with an intervention at the communicational level, in a logic of preventive socialization.

The analysis of data resulting from the use of the two main research instruments offers some insight about two core dimensions of said inclusive practices: their innovative quality and their contextualization. In addition to the impact that these practices seem to have on the development of actual institutional articulation efforts, some impact seems to be confirmed equally on socio-educational relationships, namely school-family communication, importance attributed to formal schooling, socio-cultural inclusion of youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. Data seems to warrant a somewhat fragile involvement of families and communities in practices aimed at promoting their youth's educational success.

From the point of view of their coordinators, the practices that contribute the most to overcoming school failure and dropout can be characterized as predominantly systemic strategies, with a minority being definable as programmatic; some are addressed to students, others to schools; they generally seek to mitigate or overcome conditions and factors that weaken the youth's academic and social commitment to the school; some practices mobilize resources (teachers, additional time and support to learning); others interfere with learning (student grouping, curricular content or pace of learning) and life contexts, in order to confront institutional, situational and dispositional barriers to participation and learning in school.

Again from the point of view of the people responsible for them, these practices tend to not be directed at the majority of students (they are usually aimed at specific groups); they are not particularly concerned with the pursuit of further education (following compulsory education); they do not foster and/or promote students' participation in decision-making processes, nor joint and coordinated work with families and communities.

Two main questions emerge from this data analysis, which the following stages of research will hopefully help enlighten:

(1) What expression does the issue of “equal opportunities in accessing knowledge” have in these socio-educational practices aimed at overcoming school failure and dropout? What are the children/young people, families and staff's experiences and perspectives on this domain?

(2) What needs or problems do these practices address: children/young people's needs or problems? The institution/organization's needs or problems? The professionals' needs or problems? Family or community needs or problems?

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Notes

- i. 'Eduplaces' is the project's acronym; its full title is 'Educating places: practices, voices and pathways of inclusive education'. 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.
- ii. The selection of these two nationwide 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.
- iii. 5 - Fosters confidence in the technicians'/teachers' ability to develop innovations in a flexible and contextualised way (to the detriment of encouraging the replication of technical solutions); 13 - Alters socio-educational relationships; 20 - Reveals scientific quality (defined contents are taught/learned), pedagogical quality (supported by a sound and/or innovative pedagogy) and democratic quality (promotes equality among students, enhances social justice, solidarity and freedom in education).
- iv. 10 - Fosters (through the creation of its own times, spaces and procedures) relationships with parents/families and communities; 11 - Promotes the (deliberative, evaluative, educational) participation of parents/families and communities; 12 - Is founded on the joint and coordinated work of parents/families and communities.
- v. According to Oliver and Valls (2004), preventive socialization is the social process through which the conscience of a set of norms and values that prevent behaviours and attitudes leading to violence (and other forms of exclusion) is developed, while favouring those that promote equity.

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