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# Mapping Educational Pathways through Focus Groups: Children and Young People on the Impact of Inclusive Socio-Educational Practices

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## Abstract

As school became a primary instance of socialization and acculturation, and school education expanded across practically every country in the world, and reached virtually all children/young people, during an increasingly longer period of the life cycle, school failure and dropout emerged as cross-cutting educational and sociopolitical issues. Nonetheless, the voices of the actors engaging in initiatives aimed at overcoming school failure and dropout are seldom heard. Project EDUPLACES (PTDC/MHC-CED/3775/2014) proposed to do just that, through interviews, questionnaires and focus groups with parents/families, children/young people, teachers/other staff and community representatives. This paper explores the outcomes of eight focus groups involving a total of 57 children/young people, with a particular emphasis on the discourses emanating from the participants in Mediation and Study Support practices. As we discuss how initiatives aimed at overcoming school failure and dropout address issues such as inclusion, participation, learning, empowerment and community development, focus groups emerge as a relevant tool for navigating the meaning(s) of educational success.

## Key words

Socio-educational practices, school failure and dropout, mediation, study support, focus groups.

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# Mapeando Itinerarios Educativos a través de Grupos Focales: Niños y Jóvenes sobre el Impacto de Prácticas Socioeducativas Inclusivas

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## Resumen

A medida que la escuela se convirtió en una instancia primaria de socialización y aculturación, y la educación escolar se expandió prácticamente en todos los países del mundo y llegó prácticamente a todos los niños/jóvenes, durante un período cada vez más largo del ciclo de vida, el fracaso escolar y el abandono escolar surgieron como temas educativos y sociopolíticos transversales. Sin embargo, pocas veces se escuchan las voces de los actores involucrados en iniciativas destinadas a superar el fracaso y abandono escolares. El proyecto EDUPLACES (PTDC/MHC-CED/3775/2014) propuso hacer precisamente eso, a través de entrevistas, cuestionarios y grupos focales con padres/familias, niños/jóvenes, maestros/otro personal y representantes de la comunidad. Este artículo explora los resultados de ocho grupos focales que involucraron un total de 57 niños/jóvenes, con un énfasis particular en los discursos que emanan de los participantes en prácticas de Mediación y Apoyo al Estudio. A medida que discutimos cómo las iniciativas destinadas a superar el fracaso y abandono escolares abordan temas como la inclusión, la participación, el aprendizaje, el empoderamiento y el desarrollo comunitario, los grupos focales emergen como una herramienta relevante para navegar los significados del éxito educativo.

## Palabras clave

Prácticas socioeducativas, fracaso y abandono escolar, mediación, apoyo al estudio, grupos de enfoque.

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School failure and early school leaving have been identified, for decades, as a major concern in the European Union, recognized as the most visible manifestations of the problem of school disengagement, and seen as factors of social exclusion (e.g. Jahnukainen, 2001). Portugal is one of the member-states with the highest rates of school failure and dropout, but also the one that has most significantly reduced these numbers over the last few decades (DGEEC, 2019). Despite the recognition of an improvement trend in several of the available indicators, these continue to be serious problems in Portugal. Since the 1980s and the 1990s, several policies and programs have been developed with the aim of promoting educational success and reducing dropout.

In this context, project EDUPLACES (PTDC/MHC-CED/3775/2014) proposed to explore the factors that support the inversion of the school failure and dropout cycle. The project consisted of a multi-case study of ten contexts, developed over the course of three phases/years, by a team of eighteen researchers from four Portuguese universities. Each context hosted one socio-educational practice (a case-practice), developed within (one of) two national intervention programs (one school-based and the other community-based). These tend to be implemented in socioeconomically more disadvantaged contexts, where systemic problems of school failure/dropout are concomitantly identified. However, while it may be the case that these (and other) practices (aimed at overcoming school failure/dropout) take place in disadvantaged contexts, we cannot establish a causal relationship between school failure/dropout and socioeconomic disadvantage, nor was this one of the research project's goals.

As it was our understanding that the public involved in such practices experience some fragilities that put them at a disadvantage in the face of the standardized educational system - and that these disadvantages, whether perceived or effective, can lead to discriminatory attitudes that, in turn, aggravate them - it was the research team's option to preserve the anonymity of people, institutions and places.

The project prioritised the perspective of actors involved in socio-educational practices (children/young people<sup>1</sup>; parents; teachers/professionals and institutional leaders) and intended to answer two research questions: i) which processes and factors contribute to building inclusive socio-educational practices; and ii) which processes and factors interrupt the school failure-dropout cycle, and favour a remobilization towards education.

This paper begins by briefly addressing EDUPLACES' theoretical and epistemological framework, and in a second stage it focuses on the methodological approach adopted to highlight the importance of the children's voices, through Focus Groups. We will analyse five of the practices (three Mediation practices and two Study Support practices), calling on children's understanding about these practices' main contributions to overcome school failure<sup>2</sup> and dropout<sup>3</sup>, and favour educational success.

### **Socio-Educational Practices Aimed at Overcoming School Failure and Dropout: A Framework to Understand Barriers to Participation and Learning**

Social and educational exclusion are multidimensional, multifactorial issues. While it may be difficult to establish a causal relationship between exclusion from school, and certain disadvantaged contexts or backgrounds, children who are suffering from (or en route to) school failure and dropout “are at risk of subsequently being excluded from areas such as employment, health, housing, and political participation” (Flecha, 2015, p. 1). The consequences of school failure and dropout are evident, and configure it as something to tackle as early as possible, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals established in the UN’s 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2015).

Ever since there have been policies, programs and practices aimed at overcoming school failure and dropout, there have been studies and assessments about their scope, effectiveness and impact. It is well known that school failure and dropout are processes that start, in many cases, even before the child enters school, as a result of the interaction between individual, institutional, contextual, family and school causes and processes. School alienation is often used as a generic concept that somehow blocks out much of the complexity of these processes (Ferguson et al, 2005; Dale, 2010; Costa et al, 2013). There is scientific research on policies, programs and practices aimed at these socio-educational problems (Frاندji 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; Barros & Barrientos-Rastrojo, 2014). EDUPLACES proposed an alternative question: what are the points of view of the actors involved in inclusive educational practices about their contribution to overcoming school failure and dropout?

In Portugal, mass access to schooling is a more recent process than in other countries in Europe and the Western world. Nevertheless, and similarly to what happened in other contexts, this democratisation was associated with a sharp rise in the demand for an academic qualification, in line with the promise that better qualifications would translate into better work situations. Parallel to this “faith” in schooling as a lever for social ascension, we find a progressive expansion of the school's mandate<sup>4</sup>: it has become, in some contexts, the main instance of socialisation, where children experience, during the most significant part of their day, contact with peers and adults, contact with value systems, rules of conduct and diversity, and build a sense of identity.

As the project set out to identify and analyse practices, voices and pathways of inclusive education, one of its main foci was to understand what contributed to interrupt the school failure-dropout cycle and favour educational remobilisation.

To understand the socio-educational practices studied, a framework discussing barriers to access and participation in 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 mobilised in these studies includes institutional barriers (internal to institutions), situational barriers (including sociocultural expectations and pressures, or family and work responsibilities) and dispositional barriers (such as fear of failure or sense of alienation, attitude

toward intellectual activity or educational goals, level of educational aspirations and expectations of the subjects) (Ekstrom, 1972, p. 2).

Having established what framework EDUPLACES used as a basis to analyse and characterise this set of inclusive socio-educational practices, we will now look into the project's methodological pathway, namely the option for focus groups.

### **Methodology: Dynamics, Challenges and the Qualitative Experience of Focus Groups with Children**

Focus groups are a type of group interview wherein “[i]nstead of asking questions of each person in turn, (...) researchers encourage participants to talk to one another; asking questions, exchanging anecdotes, and commenting on each others' experiences and points of view” (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, p. 4).

For social sciences and humanities, the work with focus groups as a data collection technique (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999; Graffigna & Bosio, 2006), has come a long way and culminated in their recognition as "consciousness-raising, enabling new information and taboo subjects to be aired; and they are interactive, highlighting the primacy of relationships" (Moloney, 2011, p. 59).

Focus groups allow for a real group dynamic, interactive and interventive on the part of participants and among participants (Moloney, 2011).

Focus groups have two strong characteristics: one related to their existence as spaces for sharing and generating knowledge that is, in itself, a shared experience; the second, which refers to the creation, by the facilitators, of a safe, comfortable and enabling environment for the participants (if the focus group is successful).

Given these theoretical and analytical indications, the research conducted by EDUPLACES viewed focus groups as tools capable of generating a forum for personal, family, social and even cultural dialogue (Baker & Hilton, 1999).

In the particular case of focus groups involving children, it is important to understand not only the need to adapt the discourse to the target audience (Krueger, 1994; Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999), but also issues related to anonymity and confidentiality, as well as authorisation by legal guardians (Morgan et al, 2002).

Dynamic and interactive strategies should be devised and developed during the focus group with children, anticipating sessions that are as short as possible, with groups not exceeding 12 participants, with a strong preparation by the facilitator and, whenever possible, the presence of two facilitators (Morgan et al, 2002; Hyde et al, 2005). In addition to carefully observing body language and even the silences, the facilitator's role should be to promote dialogue and not to lead the ideas and themes to be explored (Raby, 2010).

In EDUPLACES, the main objective of focus groups with children was to listen to their voices, prioritising their individual experience, as reconstructed within the collective experience that focus groups provide.

EDUPLACES was eminently qualitative, closer to a more comprehensive, interpretative (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994; Mertens, 2014; Lewin & Somekh, 2015) and even reflective and critical approach (Tuckman, 2000; Morin, 2001) of the steps and results of the research process.

Hetero-reflection methodologies were transversal to all moments and phases of the project, assigning to each researcher instances of analysis with a qualitative focus that respected the ethical guidelines and direct action with the field and its participants (SPCE, 2020), as well as dialogically returning the collected data and the ensuing analysis to the participants.

Considering EDUPLACES specific framing research questions (listed in the ‘Introduction’ section of this paper), a script (see Appendix) was created to assist the development of the focus groups with children engaged in these socioeducational practices aimed at overcoming school failure/dropout. The purpose of this script was to ensure that the participants did not stray away too much from our proposed topics of discussion, which were organised around three main dimensions: 1. the timeline and the motives of their involvement of the practice in question; 2. their views on the practice’s rationale, action and general impact; and 3. their assessment of the practice’s explicit impact on their own school performance.

The script facilitated the establishment of a collective reflective dialogue within the inquired groups, as well as the creation of an empathic and dialogic space between the children (Frey & Fontana, 1993; Kitzinger, 1994; Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). At any rate, the flow of the interaction with the children, and of the children between themselves, dictated for the most part the pace and the direction of the focus group discussions.

As part of the funding organisation’s open access policy, EDUPLACES made use of the host university’s newly developed platform for sharing, publishing and managing research data. Data collection/analysis instruments, anonymised transcripts of interviews and focus groups, as well as descriptive statistics, are available in the EDUPLACES dataverse hosted by the University of Minho’s data repository (DataRepositoriUM)<sup>5</sup>.

## Data Analysis

The work with five inclusive socio-educational practices, defined as Mediation and Study Support practices, from two types of context (community-based and school-based), allowed the development of eight focus groups with children.

The information collected through focus groups was analysed using NVivo 12. Prior to this analysis, data was transcribed and anonymised, and then returned to participants for validation. Based on the theoretical/epistemological framework and on the first impressions emerging from the empirical work, the category tree was constructed (in a multi-stage process engaging the whole research team), including the possibility of formulation of emerging categories (which were then integrated). Data analysis was permanently triangulated, with at least four researchers cross-coding transcripts.

While there has been previous discussion of some of the outcomes of EDUPLACES (e.g. Antunes, 2019; Antunes & Lúcio, 2019; Lúcio & Antunes, 2021; Rodrigues et al., 2022), focus groups with children had yet to be granted specific attention and reflection. The purpose of this paper is to highlight these outcomes, through the interpretative exploration of ideas shared among the children who took part in this study (Moloney, 2011). We wish to emphasise their

experiences and their voices towards the subject matter (inclusion and educational success), considering both individual and collective experiences (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999).

In alignment with the idea of a process of positive influences generated by inclusive socio-educational practices in the educational, social, cultural and personal pathways of children (Antunes & Lúcio, 2019; Rodrigues et al., 2022), the analysis of the outcomes of the focus groups involving children converged in the definition of three main lines of analysis, to be explored:

1. the types of barriers that these children identify as obstacles to their school success;
2. how the existence of, and participation in, inclusive socio-educational practices may or may not positively influence the school pathway of these children; and
3. what understandings these children have about their educational pathway to date (at the time of the focus group), as well as about education and school in a broader sense.

## Results

### **The Voices of Children Participating in Mediation Practices**

EDUPLACES analysed three Mediation practices: two were community-based practices located in the Northernmost region of Portugal (N\_CB\_1 and N\_CB\_2) and one was a school-based practice located in the Northwest of the country (NW\_SB\_2). While they differed in terms of their inception, their relationship with the school, the characteristics of their supporting staff and their operationalization, the three Mediation practices had the following features in common:

1. They generated and supported negotiation and approximation processes between school actors, and children and their families;
2. They were seen as interfering in unbalanced, complex and multifaceted situations and relations of power(s) and meanings.

In two cases, the practice of Mediation is described as "a kind of itinerant structure, (...) a communicational practice that interacts with other practices" and mobilises different "intervention agents", in which "one of its functions it is to 'translate' the language and culture of the Roma community into the official language of the school and vice versa" (cf. Descriptive Note of Practice N\_CB\_2). In another case, as a specific technical body within a school context, the Mediation practice is characterised by the articulation with school staff and technical services (health, justice, social security), and also by the "intervention with the families, together with students, managing conflicts, giving support in the classroom when it comes to more complicated students" (cf. Descriptive Note of Practice NW\_SB\_2).

These would, therefore, be mostly systemic strategies (De Witte et al, 2013; Rumberger, 2001), in that they are not focused exclusively on students' outcomes and behaviours, but more

on contextual aspects that shape the learning experience for children. In terms of the primary target of their intervention, Mediation practices mainly focus on effecting change at the family level and/or at the school level - or, better said, at the relational level between the two settings. In terms of how they fit in a typology of the school's responses to diversity, Mediation practices tend to combine responses associated with the compensatory school with others closer to the integrative school, or the inclusive school.

Five focus groups were developed involving children participating in the three Mediation practices: two for both N\_CB\_2 (eight participants in the first and four in the second) and NW\_SB\_2 (four participants in the first and six in the second), and one for N\_CB\_1 (six participants), for a total of 28 participants.

Considering the 47 sources that constitute the core empirical corpus of the EDUPLACES research project (totalizing 37 focus groups and ten interviews), the “processes contributing to overcome barriers” most frequently mentioned by all participants refer to Pedagogy, curriculum and evaluation (297 mentions across 37 sources), School-family-community interactions (216 mentions across 38 sources) and Stability of the intervention teams - Strong and enduring relationships (103 mentions across 23 sources).

Children, as a whole, most frequently mention “processes” pertaining to pedagogy, curriculum and evaluation (64 mentions across 11 sources), sustaining learning - the student craft (35 mentions) and student participation (27 mentions). This seems to indicate that children participating in inclusive socio-educational practices (such as those analysed by EDUPLACES) recognise these practices' role in creating spaces, times, activities and procedures that promote their participation in decision making processes referring to contents, activities and rules.

The children participating in Mediation practices offer a specific and somewhat dissonant understanding about these practices' main contributions to overcome school failure and dropout. Participants in N\_CB\_1, for instance, highlighted how the practice tackles obstacles pertaining to the student role (improving academic outcomes), the student craft (mastery of norms related to language, posture, internalised self-control) and expectations (extraneous outlooks on student performance):

Participant 1 - Úrsula once said that, if someone teased me, to go and file a complaint,

I'm like that now, only if there's a really big reason for hitting do I hit.

Moderator - You found another way to solve the problem, didn't you?

[Excerpt from the N\_CB\_1 focus group]

Children participating in N\_CB\_2 focused on the practice's contribution to overcoming barriers connected to the stability of intervention teams, school-family-community interactions (communication, translation and negotiation processes) and the student role:

Moderator - And do you think that this activity that you develop here with the Project BC [name of the practice] helps you at school?



Participant 1 - It helps me a lot, when I'm here, it's like having someone who only helps me, we focus more.

Participant 2 - And we get to know these people more than others.

Moderator - And what difference does it make?

Participant 2 - We can talk freely.

Participant 1 - We trust them more.

[Excerpt from one of the N\_CB\_2 focus groups]

Finally, as far as Mediation practices are concerned, participants in NW\_SB\_2 discussed how the practice intervenes in terms of obstacles related to pedagogy, curriculum and evaluation (organisation of time, space, groups, contents and study cycles, work teams, rhythm, general rules, performance rules), stability of intervention teams, and expectations:

Moderator - What else, what do they do most to make you feel that much better? Because I don't know what they do with you...

Participant 5 - They also open up to us so that we can be more at ease, and that always helps with everything, at least in my opinion.

Participant 1 - Hmm.

(...)

Moderator - If I could ask you the question like this: how do you think the technicians help you, could you tell me anything?

Participant 3 - With studying.

Participant 1 - Being focused.

Participant 2 - With studying.

Moderator - In the study, staying focused in class, the issue of understanding...

Participant 3 - In our problems.

Moderator - In your problems, this is important. Like what?

Participant 5 - Both at home and here at school.

Participant 1 - Yes, both at home and here at school.

Moderator - What do they do?

(...)

Participant 3 - Talk to us.

Participant 5 - Talking to us, giving us another chance to solve.

Moderator - Okay. That's good! Is it part of the issue of caring that you were talking to me about?

Participant 5 - Yes.

[Excerpt from one of the NW\_SB\_2 focus groups]

Moderator - We already have an opinion from [Participant 5], we need the others, because they are different here.

Participant 1 - My parents didn't really want to know about school, for example, they used to say "it's up to you, but it's good", but now they're always on my back for me to do the right things.

[Excerpt from one of the NW\_SB\_2 focus groups]

### **The Voices of Children Participating in Study Support Practices**

Of the two Study Support practices from which children participated in focus groups, NW\_CB is located in the Northwest region of Portugal, and NE\_CB is located in the Northeast of the country. Three focus groups were developed within these practices: one for practice NW\_CB (11 participants) and two for practice NE\_CB (four participants in the first and four in the second), for a total of 29 participants.

Both practices mobilise additional resources to sustain learning processes that aim to strengthen fragile academic performances. They take place within a community context, involving different professionals (teachers, coordinators, monitors, psychologists, among others), having a daily work routine, with a fixed place to dynamise activities focused on school support.

Specifically, NW\_CB aimed to increase the personal, social and school skills of children, promoting normative behaviour, school inclusion, civic participation, developing conditions for the full exercise of their citizenship and enhancing their social inclusion. This practice aimed to provide school support through structured, daily school support in different subjects, minimising school difficulties and promoting their school performance. Moreover, NE\_CB focused on school follow-up and guidance, by supporting/monitoring the completion of homework assignments and preparing for tests, and, at the same time, promoting study skills such as autonomous and collaborative work among children. It can be added that the activities carried out within the scope of this practice were supported by the dialogue between its technical team and the schools attended by the children.

NW\_CB and NE\_CB also promote a few other skills that were not directly related to study support, including self-organisation, autonomous work, strategies to fight stress connected to the moments leading up to assessment, involvement with the local community, among others.

Hence, NW\_CB and NE\_CB are systemic strategies, mobilising and reorganising resources with the aim of supporting learning and improving the academic performance of children (De Witte et al, 2013; Rumberger, 2001). These practices are mainly aimed at students, their primary target, with the involvement of teachers and other support agents in a community context. In relation to how Study Support practices correspond to a typology of the school's responses in dealing with diversity, they are associated mostly with compensatory school, namely with individual development programs and teaching individualization techniques.

Considering the contextual elements mentioned above, and the voices of children participating in these practices, it was possible to infer that, related to NW\_CB, behavioural problems on the part of some children are mentioned as one of the main obstacles to their school success. At the same time, the way the formal curriculum is taught, and the more formal didactic activities developed in school contexts, emerge as demotivational elements for these children. The children's own relationship with teachers, mostly conflictual or distant, is also highlighted as an obstacle to academic and social performance. In NE\_CB, however, children refer to it as an obstacle to their success, specifically the scientific quality of learning (whether defined contents are taught/learned) provided to young participants by professionals who lack basic training that meets their real needs.

Participant 8 - [in relation to the Teachers] I don't know, they are annoying, they are always complaining about everything and nothing, they do, they get disciplinary fouls just for a little thing.

“They [the Teachers] demand a lot from us and we don't have those skills”

Moderator - So the three of you feel that the classes are very noisy, very confusing, and at the same time that the Teachers are impatient, am I saying that right?

Participant 5 - Mm-hmm.

Participant 7 - Yes.

Participant 8 - Yes.

[Excerpt from the NW\_CB focus group]

Participant 2 - Some professionals [of the practice] have difficulties in teaching us some subjects (...) In order to study, we must have computers, we must have a virtual school. But I don't know why I go to virtual school. I prefer studying through books than studying through virtual school.

Participant 3 - Here the professionals don't understand everything. ... I think that for them to be professionals of the BC project [name of the practice] they should have taken a course...

Participant 1 - A course...

Participant 3 - Because they don't understand all subjects.

Moderator - In other words, if I understood, if there is a professional with Portuguese-English training, maybe he/she can't explain Mathematics to you?

Participant 2 - This is what happens most of the time when we come here to study. They cannot help us.

Moderator - And do you think that the teachers at school are less demanding?

Participant 2- More demanding. To prepare us for exams.

[Excerpt from the NE\_CB focus group]

On the other hand, in both practices (NW\_CB and NE\_CB), the existence of a team of professionals who motivate and encourage them every day is seen as a fundamental aspect for the promotion of autonomy and well-being. So, the children focused on the practice's contribution to overcoming barriers connected to the stability of intervention teams, and school-family-community interactions (communication, translation and negotiation processes):

Moderator - And how do they treat you?

Participant 9 - They treat me well, they treat me, to encourage people to believe that people are capable of more and that's it.

Participant 8 - It is like a second family to me.

Participant 10 - Because, I am going to speak personally, of me, if I probably had not entered here I would not see the school the way I see it. Because, it's not a question of being from the “neighbourhood” or not, but I think that the technicians and teachers here help us a lot to see beyond, not only the question of school, but what we can be in the future with the help of the school.

Participant 7 - They really want to help the students to have good grades.

Participant 8 - They want us to have a good life.

Participant 9 - That we succeed in the future.

Participant 8 - Yes!!!

Participant 9 - And they help us grow as people.

[Excerpt from the NW\_CB focus group]

Participant 8 - I came here because at home my parents are always doing something and then when I'm doing my homework, there's no one to help me and so they sent me here. Here I do my homework and when I have any questions, I ask someone to help me.

[Excerpt from the NE\_CB focus group]

In the specific case of NW\_CB, positive differences in children's behaviour was reflected both at school level, and at a social and personal level: former participants in the practice later won scholarships and/or became monitors within the project.

Participant 8 - I don't know, for example, I used to behave badly, then I came here to the "PNBC" and I started behaving well, I started doing the responsibilities, I feel that something changed in me.

Moderator - That is, there is a... Beyond school here, there is the training as a person? Does it make sense for me to say this?

Group: Yes!

Participant 7 - And there are activities that help us to be less inhibited,

Participant 9 - They teach us how to do good.

[Excerpt from the NW\_CB focus group]

Regarding NE\_CB, children's voices point out that the practice promotes their autonomy in studying and performing the student craft, and the student role:

Moderator – And what has changed?

Participant 5 – Grades and behaviour.

Participant 8 – I changed my grades, I changed in being a friend to others, because in 1st grade I wouldn't help... I would see a kid who was sad or crying and I wouldn't help, now I go to them immediately.

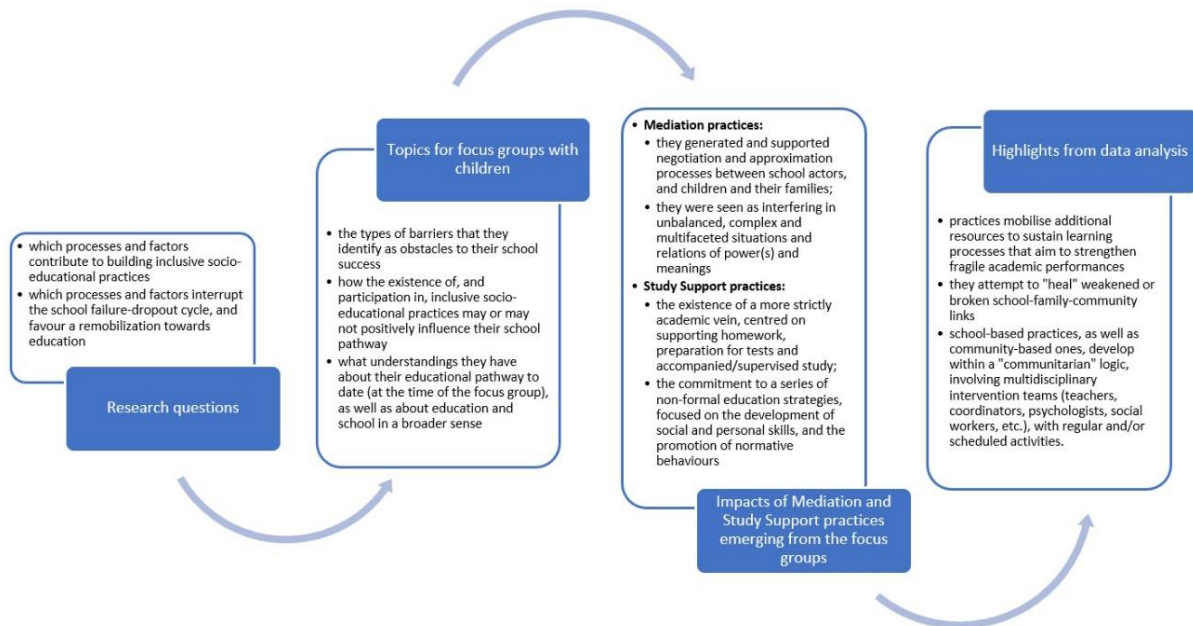
Participant 7 – In the first year I only played in classes with my friends...

[Excerpt from the NE\_CB focus group]

Figure 1 (below) attempts to map out the research project's main goals, the topics addressed within the focus groups with children, the main impacts highlighted by these participants regarding the practices with which they are engaged, and the consistencies emerging from data analysis.

**Figure 1**

*Mapping the project's objectives and main findings, considering focus groups with children engaged in Mediation and Study Support practices*



## Discussion

The changes that have taken place in contemporary societies have produced a certain reconfiguration of mediation processes: associated with the expansion (or complexification) of the concept of Education, “the emergence of lifelong learning and the pluralization of educational spaces has demanded an increasing articulation between different institutions and people” (Lúcio & Neves, 2010, p. 485). The emergence of Mediation practices such as the ones analysed by EDUPLACES seems to corroborate that.

Torremorell (2008) summarises several authors’ contributions regarding the models of relationship between people participating in mediation processes, the conflict situation in which they find themselves, and the communication process that is established:

In the “problem solving” model, the objective of mediation is to reach an agreement, whereby attention is focused on the conflict (the concrete situation, perceived as disturbing); In the “transformative” model, the objective of mediation is personal development, whereby attention is focused on the participants;

In the "communicational" model, the purpose of mediation is the renewal of narratives (i.e., the social recomposition of the relationships between individuals, and between individuals and the world), so attention is focused on the process.

The Mediation practices that EDUPLACES analysed appear to have a hybrid goal of personal development (translated in educational success for the children they work with), closer to the transformative model above, and recomposition of relationships (closer to the communicational model), in the sense that the school-family-community relationship is a relationship between cultures, which involves individual/collective and out-of-school/school

aspects and constitutes a "power relationship" that "can contribute to reinforce, maintain or mitigate social inequalities and cultural differences" (Silva, 2010, p. 450).

Mediation work, like others in the socio-educational field, is developed with and for people. Mediation devices, services or platforms, such as these practices, are, therefore, integrated in a social and political movement to promote citizenship, autonomy, responsibility and participation; in this sense, mediation work is inclusive and cooperative in nature. While mediation should aim for impartiality and neutrality, there is no neutrality in opting for the mediation process; this is, eminently, a moment of political implication, which, in these practices, translates into a kind of militancy regarding the educational and social success of these children.

According to Schwerin (1995), "one of the major reasons for the appeal of community mediation (...) is because of the linkage that is believed to exist between participation in the mediation process and the empowerment of individuals and communities" (Schwerin, 1995, p. 7). We can see that the fundamental aspect behind empowerment is the existence of a positive feedback cycle: the more positive the participation experiences, and the more motivated the individual feels, the more they will want to participate. Mediation is, within the framework of social and educational work, the one that most strongly depends on individuals' motivation, interest and availability for action. This might explain why the issues of expectations and the stability of intervention teams emerge so prominently in the discourses of children participating in Mediation practices.

As spaces for reconfiguration and narrative reconstruction of interactions, the work of mediation that these practices undertake can serve the purpose of bringing individuals closer to organisations. The Mediation practices that EDUPLACES analysed appear to emerge as *bricolage* (Demazière, 2010) devices, in that they help children and their families navigate the particularities and instability of school pathways.

Emerging from the analysis of Study Support practices, it can be added that the existence of practices that are durable, stable and that extended across school years and developmental periods, emerges as a key element for success. At the same time, more dynamic activities, close to the community and encouraging group spirit, are seen with enthusiasm and as enhancers of school, behavioural and personal motivation. This, in turn, is related to the correct adaptation of tools and strategies for action and intervention by the practices' technical teams to their target audience: children from a culturally, economically and socially fragile environment.

Two singularities emerge from the analysis of the two Study Support practices:

- the existence of a more a more strictly academic vein, centred on supporting homework, preparation for tests and accompanied study;
- the commitment to a series of non-formal education strategies, focused on the development of social and personal skills, and the promotion of normative behaviours.

In different ways, each of these singularities contributes to a mastery of the student craft as enunciated by Perrenoud (1995). Data suggests that, within these Study Support practices, children indirectly point to institutional barriers as the main barriers to their school success, linked to the narrowness of the type of knowledge that is valued and disseminated by the school

through the regular curriculum (Young, 1982); there is also a lack of consolidation/acquisition of the prerequisites for learning the student craft and role (Perrenoud, 1995).

While the analysis of the focus groups with children engaging in these five practices aimed at overcoming school failure/dropout reveals trends consistent with the typology of practice (i.e. similarities between Mediation practices, and similarities between Study Support practices), it also unveils other, more transversal aspects of the impacts of said practices. One of the Mediation practices (NW\_SB\_2) and one of the Study Support practices (NW\_CB), for instance, appear to share a dual focus on repairing pedagogical deficits and simultaneously supporting school-family-community links: this translates into an intervention on an identified gap between what is taught – and how – and what is learned, all the while dealing with (potential or actual) conflict between the children, their families and the school. The other two Mediation practices (N\_CB\_1 and N\_CB\_2) seem more explicitly oriented towards promoting school-family-community communication, translation, negotiation and interaction, while the remaining Study Support practice (NE\_CB) more explicitly addresses dispositional barriers to academic success (creating conditions favorable to the exercise of the student craft). This triptych of intervention dimensions, or categories of practice, is consistent with the sociological literature that analyses and deconstructs the institutional fabrication of barriers to school success (Bernstein, 1996), the 'distance' between the cultures of the school, the families and the communities (Silva, 2010), and the centrality of socialization and dispositions cultivated in the experiences, paths and contexts of action and relationship with the school (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970).

### Closing Remarks

The amplitude of the analysis afforded by the data collected via these focus groups with children is a testament not only to their richness, but also to the potential of focus groups in general as platforms for deepening our understanding about educational success.

EDUPLACES was a temporally circumscribed foray into the field of inclusive education, collecting and analysing first-hand data from 2016 to 2019. For the most part, the practices it set out to explore predated and outlived EDUPLACES, which means that the impact of these focus groups is difficult to assess, as it represents but a blip in the lives of these people, organisations and initiatives. That, two years later, the research team is still attempting to make sense of, and shine a light to, (different aspects of) the collected data is simultaneously a tribute to the generosity of all those involved, and a reflection of the wealth of knowledge produced.

As Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) point out, “focus groups are ideal for exploring people’s experiences, opinions, wishes and concerns ... [They] also enable researchers to examine people’s different perspectives as they operate within a social network” (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, p. 5). This means that, aside from being useful in the assessment of standpoints (both individual and collective), they are also relevant for gauging the participants’ ‘social skills’, as well as the power dynamics that already exist or that are established during the focus group. Focus groups are, therefore, contexts of social production and reproduction, which is why they offer researchers some clues about relationships and networks.

With regard to focus groups as platforms for accessing community dispositions, Waterton and Wynne (1999) highlight that community interactions “are not just a neutral medium through which intrinsic preferences and values are expressed, but are themselves a substantive part of the formation of values and attitudes” (Waterton & Wynne, 1999, p. 136). This argument is, of course, connected with the understanding of social action as a ‘social relationship’ – the eminently relational dimension of the human experience. Community dispositions, we should point out, do not need to be consensual or even consistent. Perceptions, such as identities, are flexible and mutating constructs – for individuals, groups and, ultimately, communities.

As for the role of the person who moderates or facilitates focus groups, it is important to note that “the researcher, as ‘outsider’, may provide a coherent identity for an otherwise fairly disparate group of people through his/her ‘otherness’” (Waterton & Wynne, 1999, p. 139). The researcher, as a foreign element, may therefore boost a sense of belonging and identification between the participants of the focus group, which may, in turn, favour the emergence of more intensely shared perceptions that better represent the ‘community’ – in this case, the community of children.

As we have seen, children involved in Mediation practices differ from children engaged in Study Support practices in terms of what they identify as the main obstacles to educational success, in terms of how they view and value their relationship with the practices’ staff, and in terms of how they assess the impact of these socio-educational practices in their academic outcomes.

Finally, and as we circle back to EDUPLACES’ two main research questions, the outcomes of these focus groups with children participating in Mediation and Study Support practices allow us to outline a clearer picture of how they contribute to overcoming school failure/dropout, which is to say what makes these socio-educational practices inclusive, and how do they contribute to the interruption the school failure-dropout cycle: they interfere with dispositional barriers to school success (or participation in school and learning), by supporting the learning process, and they act upon institutional and sociocultural barriers to school success, by reframing the students’, the families’ and the school’s expectations regarding children school failure/dropout trajectories.



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### Notes

1. For simplification purposes, from this point forward, these subjects will be referred to as “children”, considering that they are minors enrolled in some type of formal education and, in some cases, in extracurricular initiatives directed at a school-aged population.

2. According to Psacharopoulos (2007), school failure “may mean that a school system is failing to provide services conducive to learning, or that a student is failing to advance to the next grade and eventually becomes a drop out” (2007, p. 4). For EDUPLACES’ intents and purposes, the definition of school failure was more strictly connected with that of “[g]rade repetition or retention, also known as flunking” (Psacharopoulos, 2007, p. 5)

3. Also known as early school leaving, school dropout has been defined as leaving education without obtaining a minimal credential and/or before the completion of compulsory education, or, as stated in CEDEFOP’s Terminology of European education and training policy, the “withdrawal from an education or training programme before its completion” (CEDEFOP, 2008, p. 62).

4. The “school’s spillover”, as coined by Nóvoa (2006), or the “reinvention of the school” through “interactive articulation of the school with the local context, its insertion in networks and the construction of partnerships”, as proposed by Canário (2006).

5. Universidade do Minho. (s.f.). *EduPlaces*. Repositório de Dados da Universidade do Minho. <https://datarepositorium.uminho.pt/dataverse/eduplaces>

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## Appendix

### 1. Introductory question:

Ask each participant to identify themselves, indicating their name; age; parish of residence; school year attended; how long have they known the practice in question;

### 2. Invitation to discuss the practice:

2.1. Considering the relationship you have with the community and your experience at the School/Association/Program you attend, what are, for you, the main obstacles to your academic success?

2.2. Can you tell us a little about your experience in this School/Association/Programme?

2.3. Since attending this School/Association/Program, do you feel that your behavior and attitudes towards School remain the same or are they different?

2.3.1. Since attending this School/Association/Programme, have your learning and results at School remained the same or have they changed? How?

2.3.2. In your opinion, why did your participation in this practice maintain/change these results in school learning?

2.3.3. What do you value more and what do you value less in this practice?

2.4. Since attending this practice, do you feel the same way, better, or worse in day-to-day activities carried out at School? Why?

2.5. Since attending this practice, do you feel that your Parents/ Guardians are equally/more/less close to your school life?

### 3. Likert-type scale questions

We present below 9 questions about possible changes/positive effects that this practice had/has on your school/personal life. We ask that you answer these questions using a scale from 1 to 5, the meaning of which is as follows:

1 = Totally disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Totally agree.

1. Since you have been attending this practice, do you have more desire to go to school?

2. At home, do you talk to your parents about what you most like to do in the practice/at school?

3. Since attending this practice, do you feel more motivated to do the homework assigned to you?

4. Have your grades improved since attending this practice?

5. Do you have a positive opinion about the work and activities you develop in this practice?

6. Is it important for you that your parents are interested in your school life?

7. Do you feel that your parents are more interested in your school life since you started attending this practice?

8. Since attending this practice, do you think more about your future at school and after it?

9. Is attending this practice essential for your school success?

### 4. In your opinion, can [Practice/Programme/Project] improve and do more for you to learn, have better results and be happier at school?