

Territories of Innovation: The local dimension of innovative inclusive education practices

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Abstract: Part of a wider research project analysing practices, voices and pathways of inclusive education, and considering a set of socio-educational practices developed in the framework of two nation-wide intervention programmes in Portugal, in eleven different empirical contexts, this paper will look into the innovative dimension and the local dimension of such practices. It is a multi-case study, intended to contribute significantly to the analysis of the intervention on school failure and dropout, by mapping the points of view of the institutional actors engaged in a panel of inclusive socio-educational practices. These actors identify and characterize locally-based, successful socio-educational practices to overcome school failure and dropout, contributing to the understanding of the processes, factors, rationales and partnerships which support them.

Keywords: Educational territory, Inclusive education, Socio-educational practices, School failure, School dropout

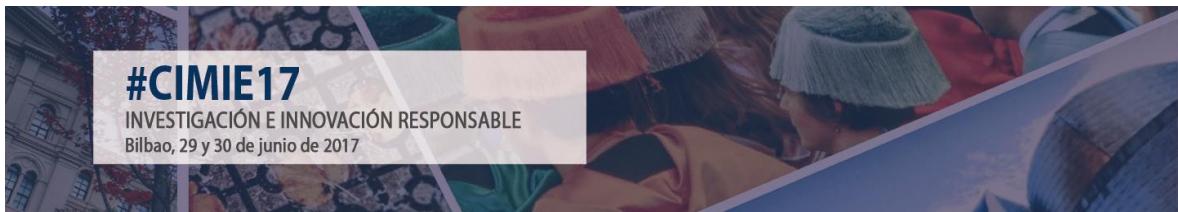
1. Objectives or goals:

The research process that informs this paper is part of a wider research project, funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, which aims to identify, characterize and discuss socio-educational practices, with an impact at the local level, which are successful in overcoming school failure and dropout. Project EDUPLACES (“Educating Places: practices, voices and pathways of inclusive education” - PTDC/MHC-CED/3775/2014) is hosted by CIEd – Research Centre in Education, University of Minho (Portugal), and includes researchers affiliated with said University, as well as the Universities of Porto, Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro and Algarve. The data presented in this paper is the outcome of the joint work of the EDUPLACES research team: Fátima Antunes (coord.), Almerindo Afonso, Armando Loureiro, Carlos Gomes, Emília Vilarinho, Esmeraldina Veloso, Isabel Costa, Isabel Menezes, Joana Lúcio, José Pedro Amorim, José Augusto Palhares, Manuel António Silva, Rosanna Barros, Tiago Neves and Virgínio Sá.

The research process unfolds around two main research questions: 1) from the implicated actors' point of view, which processes and factors, subjects, rationales and (institutional, local, community) partnerships contribute to building local inclusive socio-educational practices; and 2) which (social, institutional, biographical) processes and factors support the interruption of the negative spiral of school failure and dropout, and favour the remobilization of young people

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towards learning and building successful academic pathways? Additionally, this paper intends to address two more specific research questions: a) what new approaches can be identified amongst these inclusive socio-educational practices, in particular in regards to resource management, engaged partners, audiences, forms of participation, strategies for measuring success and dissemination networks; and b) what is the role of the local community in the development, implementation and evaluation of these inclusive socio-educational practices?

2. Theoretical framework:

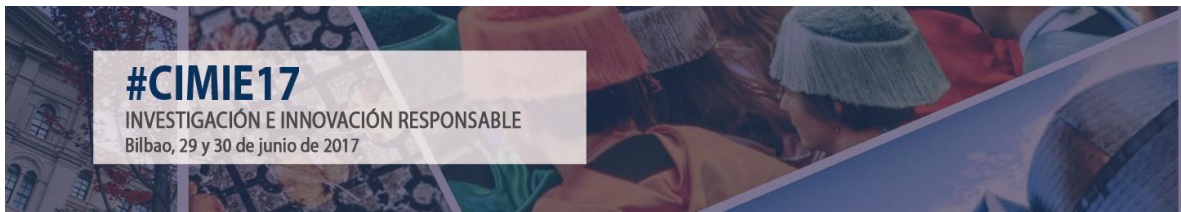
Since the 1980s, Portugal has been the stage of a series of policies, programmes and practices which have been developed with the purpose of overcoming school failure and dropout, which have, in turn, been studied and evaluated. These assessments have highlighted a contextual and diverse appropriation and reconstruction of said policies; the teachers' perspectives about students; and the multiple rationales underlying their conception and implementation (Canário, Alves & Rolo, 2001). Recently, an external evaluation highlighted how one of the above 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). Based on partially coincident data, another researcher argued in favour 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). One other study raises equally relevant questions about the scope of the results of such educational policies (Neves, Ferraz & Nata, 2016).

However, in an international and European perspective, 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). There is research about the policies, programmes 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). Research on inclusion has also pointed out the community's role within the school, that is, the relevance of community-based local strategies as the framework for change within the school (Abellán, 2016; Hargreaves, Boyle & Harris, 2014; Fullan & Boyle, 2014; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012).

Nonetheless, fairly little is known about: a) how the local dimension influences the processes, factors, rationales and (institutional, local, community) partnerships, and contributes to the construction of successful inclusive practices; b) which

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socio-educational relationships are most and less challenged by these practices aimed to overcome school failure and dropout (Moulaert et al, 2013).

3. Methodology:

The methodological challenges faced by this research project are connected with the difficulty of the problem under study, characterized by the diversity, heterogeneity, complexity and singularity of the practices, experiences and pathways that it identifies, characterizes and discusses.

Despite the predominance of the qualitative dimension, this research also uses instruments typically associated with quantitative research to collect and analyse data (questionnaires and statistical analysis).

There is a constructivist nature to this research. Epistemologically, a subjective approach to knowledge is adopted, along with the assumption of a relative artificiality in the separation between subject and object. The concern with understanding from within, and the priority given to "discovering the context", emphasizing the processes and the value attributed to contextual factors, in conjunction with a desire to apprehend the plurality of rationalities and meanings - which is at the core of education in risk societies and those based on knowledge and contexts under study - has led to an option for a multi-focal perspective.

This paper draws upon data gathered in eleven contexts, located in four Portuguese municipalities, by a team of fifteen researchers: two school-based (SB) projects and two community-based (CB) projects in Braga, one SB project and one CB project in Loulé, two SB projects and one CB project in Porto, and one SB project and one CB project in Vila Real.

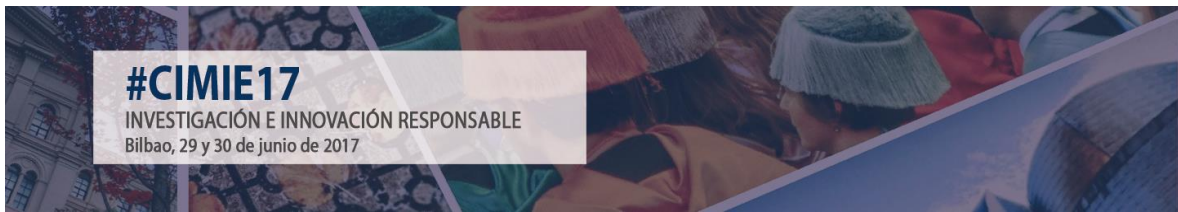
Methodologically, the successful practices to overcome school failure and dropout (inclusive practices) were identified and characterized through the use of semi-structured interviews to institutional representatives (representing schools, in the case of initiatives within the school-based programme, or local organizations, in the case of initiatives within the community-based programme). Simultaneously, a documental analysis was made, taking into account the available information on each initiative and overall on the two programmes, in an effort to triangulate/intersect information stemming from different sources. The product of this work is a portfolio of inclusive socio-educational practices.

At a later stage, the research process will focus on gathering the views of other locally-relevant actors, such as young people, teachers, social workers, other socio-educational professionals, representatives of partner organizations, families and community members.

4. Discussion of data, evidence, objects or materials:

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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 feed processes of institutional, collective and individual change. These processes and dynamics unfold in social contexts with local/particular conditions and resources. The commonalities and singularities of these practices can be assessed through multi-case studies, multi-actor perspectives, and individual and collective narratives.

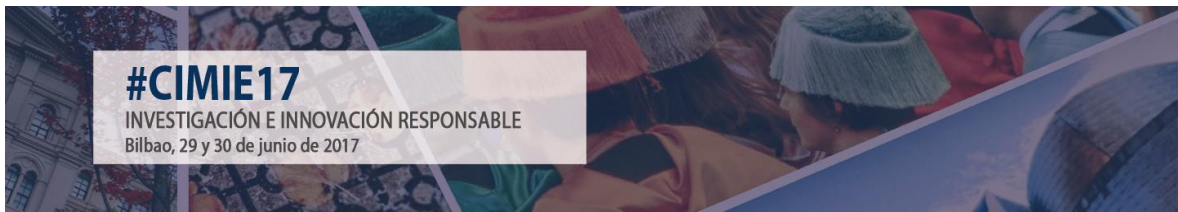
This paper explores a set of research hypothesis, stemming from these core principles: a) that the relevance of the role of the territory in these initiatives is connected with the contribution of schools, associations, companies and other local organizations, not only as 'observers', but rather as active, critical and creative co-authors of the developing educational project; b) that, from the point of view of the actors engaging in these inclusive educational practices, the territorial bond (in its several manifestations, according to each initiative's nature, goals and audiences) is an asset to the intervention projects; c) that the stability of the intervention teams behind these socio-educational practices is crucial for the soundness of the implemented innovations; and finally d) that the initiatives which are perceived as innovative are strongly connected with the sphere of social relationships, namely with an intervention at the communicational level, in a logic of preventive socialization.

The socio-educational inclusive practices were characterized according to a set of 25 criteria, grouped into four main categories: positive expectations and valorization of actors; strengthening of significant links and democratic processes; curricular and organizational flexibility and openness towards career opportunities; and monitoring/assessment and consolidated practices. A preliminary, ongoing analysis of this data, with reference to the 'local' and 'innovative' dimensions, allows for an interim, open and approximate analysis of these practices.

CRITERIUM/PRACTICE	NE_S B	NE_C B	N_SB _1	N_CB _1	N_CB _2	NW_S B_1	NW_ CB	NW_S B_2	S_SB	S_C B	TOTAL (out of 10)
The 'innovative' dimension											
Fosters confidence in the technicians'/teachers' ability to develop innovations in a flexible and contextualized way (to the detriment of encouraging the replication of technical solutions)	X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	8
Alters socio-educational relationships	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	9
Reveals scientific quality (defined contents are taught/learned),	X	X				X	X		X	X	6

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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)												
TOTAL (out of 3)	3	3	1	2	0	3	3	2	3	3		
The 'local' dimension												
Fosters (through the creation of its own times, spaces and procedures) relationships with parents/families and communities	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	9	
Promotes the (deliberative, evaluative, educational) participation of parents/families and communities	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	8	
Is founded on the joint and coordinated work of parents/families and communities	X	X		X	X		X	X		X	7	
TOTAL (out of 3)	3	2	1	3	3	1	3	3	2	3		

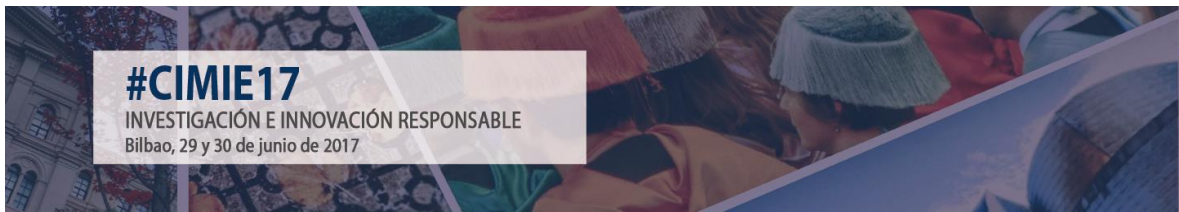
Table 1: References to criteria referring to the 'innovative' dimension (3) and to the 'local' dimension (3) emerging from the preliminary analysis of the socio-educational inclusive practices

A probationary discussion, based on the frequency of three indicators for each dimension ('innovative' and 'local'), seems to offer some insight about the relevance of these analytical lenses (Table 1). These practices appear to promote change in socio-educational relationships, namely through the fostering of teachers' and technicians' self-confidence and ability to develop innovative responses to day-to-day problems, as well as equity and participation. Similarly, their success seems to be at least partially connected with these practices' links to the local context, namely with an investment in communication with, and cooperation of, families and communities.

ITEM/ PRACTICE	NE_SB	NE_CB	N_SB_1	N_CB_1	N_CB_2	NW_SB_1	NW_CB	NW_SB_2	S_SB	S_CB
Actual efforts towards institutional links/articulation	Intra-school and intra-school group articulation	Articulation w/ school group; partnerships w/	Intra-school articulation	Articulation w/ school group; partnerships w/	Articulation w/ schools; fostering communication between	Articulation w/ child protection services, court, university	Articulation w/ school groups (teacher); fostering	Articulation w/ families, child protection	Intra-school, intra-school group and inter-	Partnership w/ other organizations

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ulation		other organizations		other organizations	schools and families		communication between schools and families	services, social security	school group articulation	
Specific bonds to the context	Communication with parents/families	Support to families	Support to families	Not mentioned	Proximity towards the neighbourhoods and local schools	Communication w/ parents/families; support to families	Articulation w/ families; partnership w/ local private school	Articulation w/ families; child-protection services, social security	Families; partnerships w/ other organizations	Proximity towards families and broader community

Table 2: References to indicators related to “Actual efforts towards institutional links/articulation” and “Specific bonds to the context” emerging from the preliminary analysis of the socio-educational inclusive practices

The practices were also subjected to an initial content analysis, on the basis of a set of 16 descriptors. In what concerns the ‘local’ dimension, two descriptors (items) were found to be particularly relevant (Table 2). This first incursion into data interpretation allows us to establish some specificities and some commonalities, namely by comparing school-based (SB) and community-based practices (CB). SB practices seem to invest particularly in school/school group-level institutional articulation, as well as with governmental structures (child protection services, social security, court, etc.), with the families being their primary link to the local context. CB practices appear to articulate with a wider array of organizations, but the families emerge once more as these practices’ main connection to the territory.

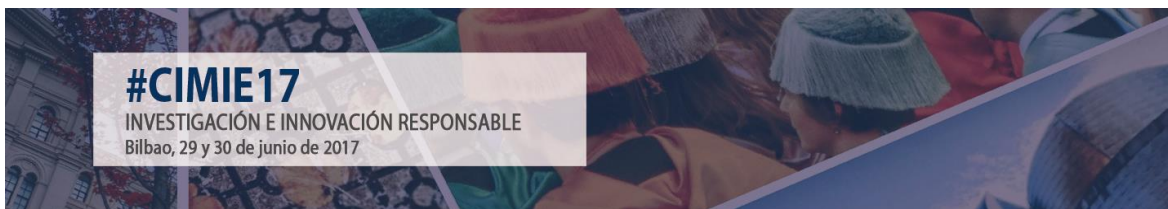
5. Results and/or conclusions:

The concept of "social innovation" - referring broadly to innovative strategies that respond to a certain community's social needs (Moulaert et al, 2013) - is somewhat present in the founding legislation for both SB and CB national programmes. However, both have been in the field for over 15 years, which means that some of these initiatives have had several "incarnations" - developed in the same context and/or by the same team and/or for the same audiences. In this sense, one must question whether it remains possible to continuously shed a problematizing eye over the territory. On the other hand, one must take into account a certain "contamination": due to the public nature of much of the initiatives’ data, but also due to the programmes’ own investment in a dissemination network, it is expectable that different initiatives draw mutual inspiration (terminology and planning-wise).

While it may be difficult to identify innovation at that level, it is certainly possible to identify it as the promotion of "inclusion and well-being through the improvement of social relationships and empowerment processes" (Moulaert,

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MacCallum & Hillier, 2013). Part of this improvement is a change in power relations, that is, a change in terms of the democratic quality of decision-making processes and/or people's ability to influence their life courses and contexts. In that sense, the analysis of the innovation in these practices will necessarily contemplate a discussion of the available platforms and formats of participation. Ultimately, it is important to clarify whether said participation unfolds in a logic closer to that of "governance" - in which those who decide consult, cooperate, establish/promote partnerships, acknowledge stakeholders and define deliberative spaces-times - or closer to that of co-construction, in which the feedback of the teams behind these inclusive socio-educational practices informs policy development and service creation (Klein et al, 2013).

6. Contributions and scientific significance of this work:

Previous research undertaken by members of the research team has pointed out that the processes of cooperative involvement (of teachers, students, families), empowerment, mediation and democratic quality were transversal to socio-educational practices that, in adverse social contexts, contribute to building successful academic pathways. Other studies have raised questions about the merits of some curricular policies and measures aimed at school failure and dropout, and about the quality of learning provided to students. The research and knowledge available at the national and international level draws attention to multidimensional factors and causes behind the processes of school failure and dropout, and to multiple policies, programmes and practices aimed at overcoming such processes. However, the understanding about the issues that this paper discusses was relatively narrow: 1) the 'innovative' dimension, identifying, characterizing and analyzing innovative elements in terms of strategies, partnerships and/or audiences covered by these socio-educational practices to overcome school failure and dropout; and 2) the "local" dimension, analyzing the links that these socio-educational practices establish with the territory(ies) where they are implemented, discussing the conditions for the emergence of learning communities (Balbín, 2016), on the basis of dynamics of dialogic learning (Aubert et al, 2008).

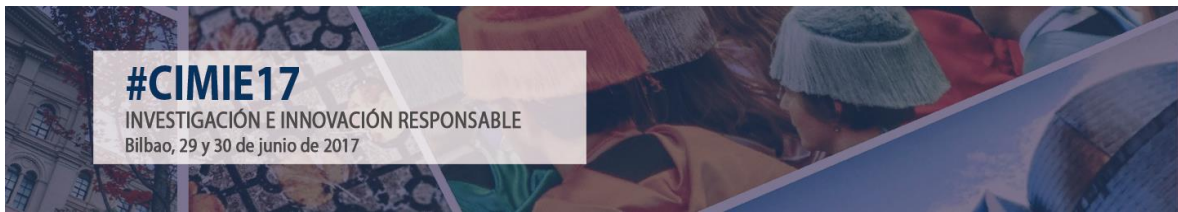
The diversity of practices and contexts, and the plurality of voices – many of them usually 'hidden' (and thus less known, such as the voices of young people) in exclusion processes, in general, but also in socio-educational processes, in particular – warrants the scientific and social relevance of this study.

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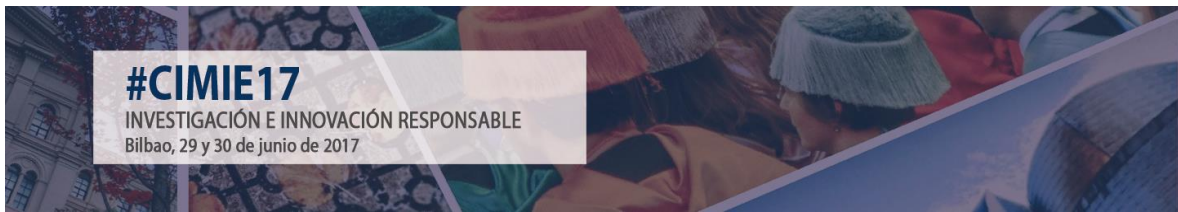




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