# Preventing School Underachievement Through Ability Grouping Practices In Schools:
## Perspectives From Programme Local Coordinators, Teachers And Social Workers

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- EDUPLACES project aims to identify and characterize socio-educational practices that:

  - contribute to an inclusive education

  - are successful in overcoming school failure and drop out

- One of EDUPLACES' research questions:

  - From the implicated actors´ point of view, which processes and factors, rationales and (institutional, community, local) partnerships contribute to building inclusive socio-educational practices?

# Methodology

- Qualitative approach (Seale et al., 2004)
  - Multi-case study
  - Ten units of observation
  - Four Portuguese municipalities
  - Three phases/years
  - Team of four Centers/Universities (UMinho, UPorto, UTAD and UAlgarve)

- Focused in the context of two different national Programs designed to tackle school underachievement and early school leaving:
  - A program developed in schools
  - A program based on local community projects

# Outcomes: First and Second Year of EDUPLACES Project

- Major milestones:

    1. Panel of Inclusive Practices – Phase/year 1 (June 2016-May/2017)

    2. Portfolio of Inclusive Practices - Phase/year 1 (June 2016-May/207)

    3. Monographs of Inclusive Practices – Phase/year 2 (June 2017/May 2018)

# Typology of Inclusive Practices: An Ongoing Draft

- The construction of a typology of inclusive practices was led by a cross-sectional analysis of the ten practices:

  - Ability Grouping (2 Practices)

  - Study Support (4 Practices)

  - Mediation (3 Practices)

  - Pedagogical Differentiation (1 Practice)

# Ability Grouping

- This presentation is based on two practices of ability grouping type from a total of five school-based practices

  - Different definitions and empirical approaches of ability grouping (Loveless, 2013)

  - "Differential instruction" use to define grouping students (Loveless, 2013)

# Ability Grouping

- Ability grouping, or homogeneous grouping, is the separation of same-grade school children into groups or classes based on school aptitude. Grouping may occur based on test scores or school records of grades (Kulik, 1992)

- Ability grouping, in schools context, consists in the organization of groups of students, with relative homogeneity of academic performance, in the expectation the pedagogical action is more effective (Antunes et al, 2017)

# Ability Grouping

- A barrage of studies criticized ability grouping emerge in the 1970s and 1980s

- Issues with ability grouping include its impact on self-esteem, effectiveness of instruction and equity among minority groups (Braddock & Slavin, 1992)

- Nonetheless, this type is found in several national programs and is pointed out by institutional leaders as successful in improvement students achievement

# How It Is Organized

## Practice 1

- Children/young people with various difficulties

- Three groups coming from three heterogeneous "Mother" classes (from 5$^{th}$ to 6$^{th}$ grade)

- Three homogeneous groups are formed in specific subjects (Mathematics and Portuguese Language)

- Supported by increased resources

# How It Is Organized

## Practice 2

- Children/young people with various difficulties

- One class (from 5$^{th}$ to 9$^{th}$ grade)

- Supported by increased resources

**Target group:** Elementary school students (5$^{th}$ to 9$^{th}$ grade). Mainly students from low socioeconomic levels

# Indicated Outcomes

From the perspective of institutional representatives the advantages of ability grouping are:

- Improvements in student outcomes

- Improvements in collaborative work, teacher-student relationships, inter-institutional articulation and teacher training

# Practice 1: One Analysis

**Factors that contribute to overcoming school failure and/or dropout**

- Support and individualized learning

- Reorganization of available human resources to support learning

- Opening and intensification of channels of communication and cooperation and/or critical factors to overcome failure and dropout

**Equal opportunities in acess to knowledge**

- Mostly compensatory

- Some doubts about the execution of the syllabus (Teachers/Professionals)

# **Practice 1: One Analysis**

## **Needs, expectations and problems**

- Students with learning difficulties
  - Provides students with prerequisites for *student´s task* (Perrenoud, 1995; De Witte et al, 2013)

  - Discontinuity of the work carried out in the 3$^{rd}$ cycle, may constitute a strong risk for further school failure and/or dropout (Teachers/Professionals)

# Practice 2: One Analysis

**Factors that contribute to overcoming school failure and/or dropout**

- Curriculum flexibility

- Adjustment of teaching pace

- Continuous dialogue with students

- Reinforcement of students' self-esteem

- Selection of teachers

- Leadership of the Project Coordinator

# Practice 2: One Analysis

**Equal opportunities in access to knowledge**

- Mostly compensatory
- The knowledge of these students can´t be compared to other students (Teachers/Professionals)

**Needs, expectations and problems**

- Students with learning difficulties
  - Through an individualized attendance (Teachers/Professionals)
  - Flexibility in syllabus and differentiated pedagogical practices (Teachers/Professionals)

# To Further Exploration In These Practices

- The perspective of coordinators, teachers and other professionals and the analysis of data seems to embrace the opinions of Kulik (1992), Braddock & Slavin (1992), as well as the opinions of proponents of ability grouping, indicating that these practices allow teachers to work closely with the students and tailor the pace and content of instruction to students' needs, improving student achievements

- In the two practices, it´s not clear the degree of normative success, and if that success reflects the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes corresponding to the level of education that these students attend

- In practice 1 some evidences supported by documental data analysis relativize the improvement of student achievements and enlights on the risk of connotation-labeling issues, which according to Braddock & Slavin (1992), can affect self-esteem of those students in the lowest achieving groups

# To Further Exploration In These Practices

- Practice 2 includes a disproportionately large number of children from socio-economically and culturally disadvantaged groups (including ethnic minorities); it is necessary to explore this status quo, in order to check whether this practice actually promotes equality in school results or if it's a practice that produces exclusion

- The two ability grouping practices may have results in the studied groups that should be read carefully, either from the effectiveness in achieve the intended result, or in particular in the equal opportunities in access to knowledge

# References

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Thanks for your attention!