

## Article

# Promoting Academic Success and Social Inclusion in Non-Formal Education Contexts: The Case of a North-East Region of Portugal

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**Abstract:** The processes leading to school failure and early school leaving are complex and involve multidimensional factors. In Portugal, as in other European countries, in the last decade, several policies, programmes, and practices have been developed to address this issue. This article focuses on a socio-educational practice of the study support type developed within a national programme aimed at social inclusion and educational success located in the community. The data collected through a semi-structured interview and a focus group with socio-educational professionals allowed us to identify how the study support practice is characterised and perceived by these actors. Processes and factors of transformation that occurred in the practice regarding its mode of implementation, conceptual evolution, and specificities were also addressed. Results indicate that the practice promotes improvements in participants' outcomes such as learning, social behaviour, integration, and autonomy; the construction of a strong and sustained relationship with significant adults from the learning point of view; and the completion of compulsory schooling and studies. Hence, the research findings highlight that participation in the practice leads to transformative processes in the academic pathways of children and young people involved in the practice concerning academic, individual, and social dimensions.

**Keywords:** prevention intervention; school success; social inclusion; study support practice; non-formal educational context



**Citation:** Rodrigues, M.d.O.; Loureiro, A.; Flynn, P.; Berigel, M.; da Silva, S.M. Promoting Academic Success and Social Inclusion in Non-Formal Education Contexts: The Case of a North-East Region of Portugal. *Societies* **2023**, *13*, 179. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13080179>

Academic Editor: Sandro Serpa

Received: 15 June 2023  
Revised: 26 July 2023  
Accepted: 27 July 2023  
Published: 30 July 2023



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## 1. Introduction

Within school disengagement, school failure and early school leaving are seen as the result of a more or less long pathway to be avoided and considered factors of social exclusion [1]. Early school leaving is often the result of a combination of factors that are strongly interconnected and lead to a cumulative disadvantage [2,3]. This problematic has become increasingly important in the European political agenda and in national education policies, and the topic has gained prominence in the definition of educational policies, social policies, and economic development policies [4] as the civic, social, and economic consequences, such as unemployment, social exclusion, and poverty, strongly related to the high incidence of school dropout in society have become visible [5].

Portugal, which for the past two decades has been among the European Union countries with the highest percentage of young people leaving the education system before completing secondary education, has made a great effort to overcome early school leaving [6]. According to data from Eurostat and the National Institute of Statistics, the school

dropout rate for early leaving from education and training in Europe in 2021 was 10.1%, while in Portugal it was 5.6% [7]. Over the last decade, under the Europe 2020 strategy, Portugal was the country that most managed to reduce these numbers, in contrast to a context of near stagnation in Europe [8]. The school dropout rate has been considered the main indicator of the performance of education systems since it allows identifying the percentage of young people who are not in employment, education, or training (NEET), facing a more vulnerable situation in accessing the labour market and possibly entering and remaining in a NEET situation.

Although the evolution of early school leaving rates remains very positive, there are still thousands of young Portuguese who continue to have low levels of education and/or professional qualifications. There are social and educational inequalities that can be translated into high rates of school failure, dropout, and early school leaving among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Over the years, the ambition has been for more young people to complete secondary education, to have better job opportunities and better social conditions, and, therefore, for the country to achieve higher productivity ratios and greater economic growth.

In Portugal, even though since 2009 most children and young people aged 6 to 18 years have attended school and are enrolled in compulsory education<sup>1</sup> [9], in 2017, 22.5% of young people aged between 20 and 24 had not completed the 12th grade<sup>2</sup> [10]. On the other hand, the levels of education and qualification achieved by the students denote inequalities related to the students' living conditions, constituting a challenge for the full achievement of the principles of inclusive education [10]. Compulsory education creates very heterogeneous pathways and life experiences and is challenging schools to provide the personalised support young people need. To address these issues, specific intervention policies, programmes and projects have been created. In recent decades, there has been an increase in public education policies aimed at overcoming school failure and dropout. These policies have expressed various formulations based on educational discourses such as the World Conferences on Education for All of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), which during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries presented, among others, the condition of universal access to education and the promotion of equity through the premise of education for all aimed at promoting schooling for all children, young people, and adults [11].

At a European level, several initiatives have been developed [12], highlighting in Portugal the implementation of interventions based on objectives such as the promotion of school success, social inclusion, and the preparation of young people for the labour market [13,14]. One of the national programmes that has received a lot of attention from society and the government is the Choices Programme due to its high success rates and innovation regarding the intervention that is carried out at the school and labour market levels. Choices is a nationwide government programme created in 2001, promoted by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, and integrated into the High Commission for Migrations, whose mission is to promote the social inclusion of children and young people from vulnerable socioeconomic contexts, aiming at equal opportunities and strengthening social cohesion. Since its creation and implementation, this measure has been subject to eight successive renewals. The latest development phase called "Choices Programme-8th Generation" (E8G) is structured in three strategic areas of intervention, namely: (1) education, training, and qualification; (2) employment; and (3) entrepreneurship and community dynamization, participation, and citizenship [15]. The E8G is currently underway, funded for the biennium 2021–2022, and is expected to involve 27,704 participants, including 6969 descendants of migrants, 5756 from Roma communities, and 285 refugees. The 105 projects have a total cost of 16,897,829.35 euros, with 70% funded by the Choices Programme<sup>3</sup> (11,761,943.17 euros) and 30% (5,135,886.18 euros) by the Consortium. The programme is project-based and managed by local partnerships. In the Choices Project implemented in a rural municipality in the north-eastern part of Portugal in the 8EG (2021), 161 participants were involved, including 18 descendants of migrants, 18 from Roma communities, and 5 refugees.

Antunes and Lúcio [16] emphasize the importance of inclusive socio-educational practices in overcoming barriers to learning in formal and non-formal educational settings such as the Choices Programme, arising from processes of promoting social inclusion and school success. Other contributions investigate successful socio-educational practices for preventing and/or overcoming school failure and dropout [17–20]. We already know from previous research that inclusive socio-educational practices, within their limits and potentialities, come from public policy guidelines that, through the action of educational organisations in increasingly diverse and complex school contexts, constitute a response to social and school inequalities [16,21].

The inclusive socio-educational practices imbued in the inclusive education philosophy [22–24] aim to develop processes to mitigate or overcome barriers to learning and participation [25] in order to promote academic success and social inclusion for all students [16]. From our perspective, we argue that these practices are situated actions that obtain meaning and feasibility in particular contexts, with specific structural aspects that shape their uniqueness [26], involving a commitment from all members of an educational community who share a common vision of the concept of inclusion, its implementation, and its configuration to meet the needs and diversity of all learners through cooperative planning and teaching [27].

One of the types of inclusive socio-educational practices identified in the literature is the study support practices that aim to develop personal and social skills often targeted at students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and with school trajectories marked by the risk or materialization of school failure and the risk of dropout [13,28–30] somewhat to compensate for deficits in pedagogy [31]. This type of practice seeks to organise additional resources to support learning processes that reinforce fragile academic performance and focus on a pedagogical model based on individualised learning and direct and personalised study support [28]. Pinto and Teles [32], in a study conducted on the Choices Programme, point out that the projects in the education area, and in particular in the context of non-formal education, aim at actions in the learning field that empower and develop new skills among the children and young people involved. In this sense, this type of practice is understood as a strategic contribution to preventing school failure, dropout, and early school leaving. This is based on Rumberger and De Witte's recognition of systemic strategies that operate through the rearrangement of the contexts in which children and young people experience and engage with school [33,34]. According to De Witte et al. [34], practices aimed at overcoming underachievement and dropout can also be classified as aimed more directly at learners (focused on improving academic outcomes, such as study support with the involvement of teachers and other staff in a school or community context), family-oriented (such as strategies promoting families' involvement in school-related activities), or school-oriented (setting up strategies to influence the organisation of schools as well as the teachers' / teachers' competencies) [28].

In this paper, we present the case of a study support practice developed in a Choices Project in a non-formal context, aimed at overcoming school failure, dropout, and early school leaving while promoting social and educational inclusion for children and young people. Particularly, we focus on the study support activities developed within the project. The paper stems from a case study developed in a Portuguese municipality in a rural area, and its main objective is to deepen the discussion of the perspectives and experiences of actors involved in the practice (institutional leaders, community facilitators, and technicians), intended to answer two research questions: (i) How is the socio-educational inclusive practice of study support characterised and perceived by these actors? and (ii) What processes and factors of transformation have occurred in the study support practice?

Given the specificities of the practice and its context, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used as data collection techniques. Based on the perspectives of the socio-educational professionals and the narrative analysis, some emerging issues were discussed during the development of the study. These reflections, arising from the interpretation of the data collected, highlight a logic of action that articulates a multifaceted dimension of

students' academic success, integrating academic, socio-relational, and biopsychological dimensions [35]. Hence, the practice promotes: flexibility and adaptation of methods, strategies, and learning proposals in terms of activities, groups, and pace; a pedagogical model based on individualised learning and direct and personalised study support; the raising of expectations of the academic performance of young people; and evidence of effective progress. This study intends to generate an understanding of the processes of transformation of an inclusive socio-educational practice of study support as a vehicle to inform the context about the multidimensional transformation processes that occur within this practice.

The article, in its structure, begins with the presentation of the methodological options and the procedures that guide data collection, on which the results and an interpretative analysis arising from the reflection on the results achieved are based.

## 2. Methodology

The study, in its empirical component, followed a qualitative approach implemented through a case study [36] carried out in a municipality located in the north-eastern region of Portugal. This research was conducted through an interview [37] with an institutional leader and a focus group [38] with technicians and a community facilitator in order to understand how these actors describe and characterize one socio-educational practice of study support type, perspective, processes, and factors of transformation that occur in the practice under study. The construction of the scripts was achieved through a process of developing an initial version of the instruments that was subjected to a validation process by the research team. Informants were selected according to two inclusion criteria: (1) being directly involved in the practice at least for one year; and (2) willingness to participate in the interview and focus group.

The interview with the institutional leader, responsible for its management and administration and also involved in the whole project's implementation, especially concerning pedagogical aspects of the practice, took place in January 2021. The focus group was held with the whole team (4 technicians and 1 community facilitator) with different backgrounds (teachers, kindergarten educators, and psychologists) and time experiences (between one and six years), with no specific training to work with vulnerable young people, in July 2022. The technicians provide school support to the participants (students from the 1st to the 12th grade or from 6 to 25 years old), and the community facilitator develops activities with children and young people with the aim of promoting greater proximity of children and young people as well as their families to the practices developed in the project. The average duration of the interview and focus group was around one hour and took place at the headquarters of the Choices Project, which was reserved for this purpose.

Ethical issues were always present and were taken care of to provide clarifications, assuring their anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained, and signing informed consent forms. The empirical study began with the application of the instruments, in the first phase, with an interview with the institutional leader and, in the second phase, with the technicians. The interview and focus group discussion were audiotaped by consent, transcribed, and anonymized, followed by a content analysis in order to clarify a core set of categories capable of capturing the views expressed.

### *Data Analysis*

Regarding qualitative data from the interview with the institutional leader and the focus group with the technical team, a content analysis was carried out [39], structured keenly on categories that enabled us to understand how the participants describe and characterize the practice under study and the perspective processes and factors of transformation that occur in and through the study support practice. We based our codification on two core categories: (A) a description of the socio-educational practice and (B) transformations that occurred in the practice. The description of the two categories frames the following items: focus of the intervention; objective; context; activities; participants and target audience; contribution; results; duration; and challenges. After defining the categorization procedures,

the NVivo12 software was used. Finally, the results were triangulated from the theoretical framework that formed the basis of the analysis in order to obtain reliable findings.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. How Is the Socio-Educational Inclusive Practice of Study Support Characterised and Perceived by These Actors?

In the study support practice under study, there are several ways in which monitoring and evaluation are performed, providing information such as school records, records of participations/school disciplinary occurrences, school information, reports of the project team, activity planning/attendance sheets, satisfaction questionnaires, a transition monitoring grid and progression in school outcomes, a skills assessment grid for children and young people, and weekly meetings of the technical team.

The practice presented was established in 2013, in the 5th Generation of the Choices Programme (5EG), and it has been developed up to the 8EG (2023) in a municipality in the north-eastern of Portugal, characterised as a rural and inland area. The target group is reached through the institution's daily activities carried out by the project, youth-to-youth information, and families.

*The project started with the 5th Generation, and it was implemented approximately eight years ago. At the time, it was a key programme for the community created to support schools and school success.*

[Excerpt from E–Institutional leader]

The practice is organised into sessions that take place between 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. with a daily frequency (Monday to Friday) for the participants for whom it is intended in order to match their school timetables.

*It has always a specific time slot from Monday to Friday. Because not all participants have the same timetable. That's also why we choose to work from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. because there are children who come to us at 3 p.m. and others who can come at 5 p.m. It also depends on the school timetable.*

[Excerpt from FG–Technician 4]

It is aimed at children and young people between the ages of 6 and 25 who come from the neighbourhoods of the Choices Project intervention area. Regarding the practice's main goal, the institutional leader and the technical staff highlight the promotion of success and progression in school outcomes through educational support that focuses on school monitoring and guidance.

*The main objectives of the practice, what we do on a daily basis, is homework support and preparation for tests.*

[Excerpt from FG–Technician 4]

*We have a new participant, who has been with us for three months, and her mother has already informed us that both she and the teacher have noticed, for example in reading and writing, that she has already improved since she has been attending the practice.*

[Excerpt from FG–Technician 3]

The practice also seeks to implement alternative and flexible responses and stimulate educational activities and actions that promote skills that are not directly related to the study support but that also contribute to the student's success at school. These skills include self-organisation, autonomous work, and strategies to combat stress characteristic of the moments leading up to the school assessment, among others. The pedagogical model of the practice is sometimes not limited to direct support of the study, seeking to do it in a way that often goes from the ludic to the academic.

[The practice promotes] *orientation, because often at home they don't have this orientation and here we help them to organise their notebooks so that they have a little pride in what they do. We show them that if they have an organised notebook they study better.*

[Excerpt from FG–Technician 3]

*Some participants have few study habits and are easily demotivated by certain tasks. And with our support, we also manage to mould other habits here, another attitude towards school and difficulties, moulding this with the kids who are learning and also not resisting so much what they can't do, or giving up. We are also helping them to change their attitude, to be motivated and to train in these study habits.*

[Excerpt from FG–Technician 2]

*I think that, in a certain way, the practice will mould them so that they will also be better people and will be able to go to school with more tools. I think it helps them to get better grades academically, it helps them in terms of self-esteem, self-confidence, and autonomy.*

[Excerpt from FG–Community Facilitator]

The distribution of children and young people through spaces is performed by tables of educational levels, but this does not prevent them from interacting with each other. The physical space where the activities take place is not structurally separated, which implies extra attention from the team and the participants so that the noise and movement of the other project activities do not distract them.

The participants are supported by various technicians (teachers, coordinators, and psychologists, among others) who help them in their school tasks (past, present, and future) and prepare them for the acquisition of autonomous study skills, responsibility, and self-organisation. The children and young people are accompanied not only in doing their homework but also in the whole process of planning and organizing their studies. All moments of the practice are channelled into stimulating cognitive and academic skills.

*As the participants arrived at the facility, we ask them if they have any homework or if they need any help, for example, to study for a test. And we do this management according to the participants' needs. This is how the practice works in both neighbourhoods.*

[Excerpt from FG–Technician 4]

*We teach them how to organise their activities and notebooks and they have everything organised, they know how to do research in a book, how to organise their homework, how to put the sheets in their notebooks, all this is to create rhythms and study habits.*

[Excerpt from E–Institutional leader]

It also highlighted the close relationship that is created between the technicians as significant adults for those children and young people and the importance that such a relationship has for the success of the activities developed in the practice and, with that, for the school's success.

[with the technical team] *they are much more at ease, and we build a relationship of trust with them that they probably don't have at school with the teachers.*

[Excerpt from FG–Technician 3]

*I am now thinking about some things that happened over time that make me think that the fact they are with a technical team, allows them to speak of their expectations for the future, the type of goals that they have, the activities that they do, the friends that they make, because they easily and informally talk to us about several aspects of their lives. So, we get to know many things that may be more difficult to figure out in other contexts.*

[Excerpt from FG–Technician 2]

The project in which the practice under study takes place is based on a specific set of operating rules transmitted to the participants and their families when they register. Participation in the project and in all its practices is free of charge. These children and

young people, in general, come from families with low levels of schooling, unqualified jobs, and/or unemployment. In some way, the practice seems to replace the support that many students have outside of school provided by their families, by tutors, and/or by study centres, but which the families of the participants enrolled in this practice are unable to provide because they lack the expertise to help them and/or the financial resources to hire such services.

*The work carried out in the practice allows the children to learn faster than if they were alone at home. At home, their parents do not have the ability to help them, perhaps they don't have such a good school education. So, it does help them a lot being here.*

[Excerpt from FG–Community Facilitator]

Thus, the practice is perceived as a very important intervention in order to motivate children and young people with regard to the attainment of study habits, autonomy, and improvement in school results and academic performance in accordance with positive expectations for the future of their academic pathway.

### 3.2. What Processes and Factors of Transformation Have Occurred in the Study Support Practice?

The study support practice under study, implemented since 2013, is developed within the scope of the Choices Project, which has undergone successive adjustments in the different applications submitted for funding (between 2016 and 2021) in order to respond to the local needs of its target audience in a rural region in the north-east of Portugal: children and young people between 6 and 25 years old. Over the years, the practice has also undergone some minor adjustments.

*The main aim of this practice is to keep them a little engaged with school so that they can fulfil some of their school obligations because they must comply with them. They always must do some work or some research. But I think it's a bit more for them to realize that they can achieve other things, other goals. I think that the practice is not exclusively aimed at school success, it's not exactly the school success part anymore. I think it started there, but nowadays it doesn't work only on that part. Because we need to work on the component of the school interest as they are a little uninterested. I don't think school is what attracts them. So, I believe that our role is also to maintain their interest in school, to try to motivate them to have some interest in school so that they may be able to get some education.*

[Excerpt from E–Institutional leader]

On the other hand, another dimension that required some flexibility in the organisation of the practice was the age of the target group in order to reach other members of the public, namely those at risk or in NEET situations.

*The age of the target group has been changing over the different generations of the Choices Project. It has already focused on an age group between 6 and 18 years old, young people between 6 and 24 years old, and this new generation includes a public between 6 and 25 years old in order to work on citizenship skills, civic participation, community dynamics, health, culture and, of course, education.*

[Excerpt from E–institutional leader]

*So, I think that's the only change, there is a greater adhesion at the level of the children. Because the organisation of the practice remained the same, the structure, let's say, of the practice was not changed.*

[Excerpt from FG–Technician 4]

As this type of project operates through funding allocated according to the applications submitted, it is observed that the decrease in the number of participants in the project has been followed by a reduction in the number of technicians engaged throughout the successive Generations (EG) and, consequently, a decrease in the number of social



neighbourhoods covered by the project and by the study support practice. Of the five neighbourhoods involved in the practice in 2017, only two neighbourhoods were functioning at the time of data collection.

*Now we no longer work in the five neighbourhoods. We, in this last Generation, haven't been able to work in all the neighbourhoods, that is, specifically with the Roma community. The kids didn't want to apply so we stopped working with them. In the next application we'll only work in two neighbourhoods.*

[Excerpt from E–Institutional leader]

*The practice currently only operates in two neighbourhoods, A, which is the project's headquarters, and B.*

[Excerpt from FG–Technician 1]

*Unfortunately, our technical team is getting smaller and smaller and so we had to close some neighbourhoods. For example, in the A neighbourhood it's very complicated to have just one technician working from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. It is impossible. There are young people in A and it is the most difficult neighbourhood to manage.*

[Excerpt from FG–Technician 4]

Another change in the organisation of the study support practice, already mentioned, is the timetable, which now operates between 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. in order to meet the needs of the participants. Some students, especially from the 2nd cycle of basic education onwards, have a school timetable that includes afternoon classes and may end at 6.10 p.m., thus not having the opportunity to participate (normally two afternoons per week) in the study support practice.

It was also possible to observe that during the months of the first and second lockdowns in Portugal caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (March to June 2020 and January to April 2021), the monitoring of the practice was conducted by telephone or through social networks. The technical team was always available to help the children, young people, and their families with the study support practice or any other requests.

*They could send an email or even a private message to our social networks whenever they had any doubt or difficulty, and they were helped in that sense. Then several activities were also launched in the social networks, and that was how we managed to keep in touch with them. And then they were also asked about everything that they were doing, including us technicians, everything that we were doing during quarantine was registered by photo and then posted on our social networks.*

[Excerpt from FG–Technician 4]

*So, we never lost contact. Even if the parents had any questions or doubts, they could also contact us.*

[Excerpt from FG–Technician 1]

However, the technicians and participants found it difficult to carry out the practical activities from home, as some children and young people had no or limited access to the internet, tablets, or computers, nor support from family members with the necessary skills to guide them in their studies.

*In the beginning, I think it was a little bit difficult for all of us because it was a new reality. We also know that not all the kids asked us for help. Some participants had their parents at home, or even older siblings that ended up playing almost our role. But for those who had more difficulties, at the beginning it was difficult.*

[Excerpt from FG–Technician 4]

In this sense, the practice seeks to provide creative and innovative responses and stimulate occupational activities and actions that promote school success and prevent absenteeism and early dropout.



## 4. Discussion and Recommendations

### 4.1. How Is the Socio-Educational Inclusive Practice of Study Support Characterised and Perceived

Emerging from the analysis of the study support practice, the perspectives of socio-educational professionals indicated that it is a consolidated practice, i.e., with a strong temporal and territorial presence [40] and understood as a key element for success.

The justification for the continuity of the practice is based on the successful transitions between school years and the positive changes in behaviour and attitudes regarding school made by the children and young people who attend the practice. This practice is considered to be central to promoting academic success and the emotional, personal, and group development of the students involved [29,30].

Despite the decrease in the number of participants in the practice due to the reduction of neighbourhoods covered by the project generations (4 in EG5, 5 in EG6, 3 in EG7, and 2 in EG8), the results for the school classifications in the 8EG (2021) indicate that most of the participants (90%) obtained positive academic achievement and progressed to the next school year. This is due to the fact that the participants have evolved in terms of habits and methods of study [13,29].

The practice targets individual development through individual and personalised support that contributes to the construction of some basic conditions related to the exercise of the student's craft [41], involving the construction of psychosocial competencies of self-control and interaction [34].

This category of practices seems to be divided into two subcategories. One more strictly academic focused on supporting homework, test preparation, and tutoring, and another, based on non-formal education strategies, focused on the development of social and personal skills and the promotion of normative behaviours [13,29,30,35]. In distinct forms, these singularities contribute towards the mastery of the student's craft [41].

In non-formal education contexts such as the Choices Project, in which the study support practice is developed, the monitoring, evaluation, and reflection processes are part of the intervention model, and the establishment of communication channels is considered essential for the development of the practice [28]. The monitoring carried out by the technical team aimed to promote the personal and social skills of the participants, reinforcing all their achievements as well as helping them find new solutions when challenges were not overcome [29].

Although it is a type of intervention of a directive nature, it is nevertheless based on processes of negotiation and stimulation that are developed based on the close relationship between the children and young people and the technicians of the project [29,30]. It is also important to point out the close relationship among the technical team as significant adults for those children and young people and the importance that this relationship has for the success of the activities carried out in the practice and, therefore, for school success [30].

It is highlighted that the fragile of families in actively participating in the academic success of young people are seen as a relevant explanatory factor for the development (success or failure) of the academic pathway [31]. And it is also dominant in the idea that academic success is essential for social integration and for obtaining economic income [42].

It is, therefore, a systemic strategy that mobilises and reorganises resources intended to support learning and enhance children's academic performance [28,33,34]. This type of practice is mainly targeted at learners, with the involvement of tutors and other support agents in community settings. These activities are related to the adaptation of tools and strategies for action and intervention by the technical team for children and young people from culturally, economically, and socially fragile environments [13].

### 4.2. What Processes and Factors of Transformation Have Occurred in the Study Support Practice?

Regarding the transformation processes that occurred in the structuring mode of the practice, in general, from the perspectives of socio-educational professionals, evidence indicated that it remained the same since its implementation, having been exceptionally changed to an online format during the period of confinement of the COVID-19 pandemic. Aside from this period of exceptional nature, some minor adjustments were made regarding

the schedule of operation, the technical staff hired, and the neighbourhoods covered by the project, highlighting it as a consolidated practice [40].

The success in the way of doing the practice remains in the sustained learning processes that aim to strengthen fragile academic performances and, the increase in personal, social, and school skills of children and young people, which promote normative behaviour, school inclusion, civic participation, developing conditions for the full exercise of their citizenship, and enhancing their social inclusion [13,29].

The development of this practice within the scope of this national programme of non-formal education, allocated in the community, inserted in a set of other practices, and in articulation with the school groups that the students involved attend, allows us to assume that it is in line with what is proposed in Edwards and Downes [19] when they advocate, among others, preventive policies and holistic perspectives to promote inclusion at school [13].

The fact that these practices coexist with other practices makes it admissible that they are seen as the vertex of a polyhedron, from the combination of which it is expected that more complex and holistic results emerge that go beyond academic results without losing their central place in the development of children and young people [35,43].

#### 4.3. Recommendations

The last assessment of the Choices Programme is quite positive, recognizing a set of strengths and opportunities that are anchored in the fact that this is a consolidated programme, i.e., with a strong temporal and territorial presence [40].

Despite the indicators of success outlined in the midterm report of the 8EG Choices Project, we point out some recommendations based on the voices of the institutional leader and the technical staff to promote the improvement of the Next Generation project in general and the study support practice in particular:

1. Increase the duration of generations (EG) to a minimum of 3 to 5 years instead of the 2 years that are currently in place. Between the application phase of the Choices Programme and the approval or rejection of a new local Choices Project, there is usually an interregnum that can last up to 3 months. This fact often leaves the participants of the Project and of the study support practice in a situation of “abandonment” and the technical team in a situation of unemployment.
2. Increase the human resources in order to overcome some difficulties in the study support provided to the participants, especially those who attend secondary education and are at risk of school failure, dropping out, or entering a NEET situation.
3. Adjusting the physical spaces of the local project to the real requests of the number and characteristics of the participants. This type of study support practice demands a separate physical space from the other practices in the Choices Project to provide a calm and quiet environment for all participants to study and do their homework.

Overall, the practice seems to stand out in its capacity to generate change in individuals and, in addition, in communities [32]. For most participants, this local project and this study’s support practice have been the only answer in a rural and stigmatised territory.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, M.O.d.R.; methodology, M.d.O.R. and A.L.; formal analysis, M.d.O.R.; investigation, M.d.O.R., A.L. and S.M.d.S.; writing— original draft preparation, M.d.O.R.; writing—review and editing, M.d.O.R., A.L., P.F., M.B. and S.M.d.S.; funding acquisition, M.d.O.R., A.L. and S.M.d.S; supervision, A.L. and S.M.d.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This work was co-funded by the European Union, through the European Social Fund, and by national funds, through the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, IP (FCT), under the doctoral research grant no. SFRH/BD/143386/2019; and by the FCT, under the multi-year funding awarded to CIIE [grants no. UIDB/00167/2020 and UIDP/00167/2020]. This publication is based upon work from COST Action CA18213 Rural NEET Youth Network, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology); [www.cost.eu](http://www.cost.eu).

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and the Ethical Chart of the Portuguese Society of Educational Sciences.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Written informed consent has been obtained from the patient(s) to publish this paper.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

**Acknowledgments:** Our acknowledgments must be addressed to all the professionals who integrate and participate in the study support practice of the Choices Project.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> An important policy decision implemented in Portugal in 2009 was to increase enrolment in compulsory education from 9 to 12 school years.
- <sup>2</sup> The Portuguese education system is structured in 1st cycle (4 years), 2nd cycle (2 years), 3rd cycle (3 years) and secondary education (3 years). Compulsory education ends with the completion of twelve years of schooling, or between the ages of 6 and 18.
- <sup>3</sup> Funding comes from the State Budget, through the Secretariat of State for the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, the Directorate-General for Education, and the Institute of Social Security. It is co-financed by the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), through the Operational Programme for Social Inclusion and Employment, and by the European Social Fund, through the Operational Programmes for the Regions of Lisbon and the Algarve, within the framework of Portugal 2020.

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