

Ten Years of “Choices” in Portugal: Four Generations, a Real Resilient Opportunity

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ABSTRACT: “Escolhas” (“Choices”) is a Portuguese programme that aims to promote children and youth social inclusion in deprived socioeconomic contexts. The present study aims to identify internal and external resources perceived by children and adolescents that participated in the programme, to understand the impact in life contexts, and to identify the resources nominated by their family, project professionals and partners. A qualitative method was used in order to analyze 365 discourses from four different groups: children and adolescents (149), family (40), project professionals (126) and project partners (50). The model used was Bernard's Conceptual Model for Resilience and Youth Development. The conclusions highlight the success and relevance of Programa Escolhas (“CHOICES”) regarding the children and the adolescents and their families, by promoting social inclusion in deprived socioeconomic contexts.

Key words: Childhood, adolescence, resilience, internal resources, external resources, protective factors

TEN YEARS OF CHOICES IN PORTUGAL: FOUR GENERATIONS, A REAL RESILIENT OPPORTUNITY?

The Escolhas (“CHOICES”) is a nationwide programme focused on promoting the social inclusion of children and young people from deprived socioeconomic contexts, particularly descendants of immigrants and ethnic minorities, in favour of equal opportunities and stronger social cohesion. It is regulated by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, depending directly on the Assistant Secretary of State and Deputy Minister of Parliamentary Affairs, and forms part of the High Commissioner for Immigration and Intercultural Dialogue.

It was established in 2001, and comprises four phases of development: the first phase from 2001 to 2003, called the “Programme for the Prevention of Crime and Integration” for youths from the most troubled districts of Lisbon, Porto and Setúbal, which benefited 6,712 people. After this first phase, in 2004 the Programme was renewed for three more years, becoming a social inclusion programme, where local institutions gathered in local consortiums were invited to submit project proposals targeting children and young people at risk, especially those living in the most vulnerable communities in Portugal. This second phase between 2004 and 2007, was called “Choices – 2nd Generation” (E2G), and was implemented nationwide and redirected towards promoting inclusion, which included 87 projects, 412 institutions, 394 facilitators, and benefited 43,200 people; the third phase (3rd Generation) lasted from 2007 to 2009, and continued the partnership model adopted in E2G, comprising 121 projects, 71 municipalities, 780 institutions, 480 facilitators, and benefiting a total 81,695 people; the fourth phase, (called “4th Generation”) started in 2010 and ended in 2012, including 130 projects, with the potential implementation of 10 more experimental projects, total number of beneficiaries of which will be counted at the end. Currently in its 5th intervention phase (5th Generation), which will run until December 2015, the Programme is currently financing 110 social inclusion projects in vulnerable communities throughout the country, with the

possibility to fund other 30 projects. (<http://www.programaescolhas.pt/enquadramento>).

Every three years, an external academic research center (DINAMIA CET, 2012), produces a complex and multifactorial indicator regarding the risk of exclusion of children and young people. This indicator reflects the changes in the risk associated with youth crime, youth pregnancy, early school leaving, and several other indicators. The Index of Children and Youth Exclusion Risk (2009) is a very powerful tool for a global assessment on our impact, as well in the identification of the priority intervention territories. The index aggregates six different indicators, including youth crime rates by municipality and looking to the youth crime rates in Portugal, it can be identified a clear impact of Escolhas (“CHOICES”) Programme in its continuous and stable reduction, in an opposite trend to what was the situation before its establishment.

When the Escolhas (“CHOICES”) Programme was conceived, various measures to promote resilience came to be established as new paradigms of intervention with children and young people most at risk of exclusion. For the Escolhas (“CHOICES”) Programme, the experience gained from the model developed in Canada proved a highly significant source of inspiration, particularly the experiences of Canada's National Crime Prevention Centre and the Canadian Council on Social Development. For these organizations, “when children develop, crime does not.”

Inspired by this learning, the lawmaker who outlined the Escolhas (“CHOICES”) Programme opted to look at these young people and communities from a new perspective, both critical and constructive, focusing on the problems, but also on the opportunities, investing in their full development and the implementation of positive experiences and interactions.

Under the Escolhas (“CHOICES”) Programme, these operational assumptions regarding the development of children and young people are structured under a positive approach to the social inclusion of young people, which breaks down into three complementary scales:

- a) Individual – resilience
- b) Community – bonding (strong links within a restricted group)

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c) World – bridging (weaker links, but within a larger group)

Thus, at the individual level, we find four fundamental dimensions in the field of fostering resilience:

1. Promoting positive interaction;
2. Developing personal, social, cognitive and moral competencies;
3. Encouraging success;
4. Providing opportunities for the construction of a positive identity.

The capacity for positive interaction is a vital emotional element that makes it possible for the children and young people to form relationships with opportunities for socialization, be they family, their peer group, school, the community or culture. This is an element often highlighted by external assessment of the Escolhas (“CHOICES”) Programme as a clear differentiator in its approach: the actual belief in a positive approach for children, young people, families and communities in general.

The Escolhas (“CHOICES”) Programme aims for the integrated development of children and young people through positive building of their development, including social, emotional, cognitive and moral competencies. According to the external assessment that examined the theoretical and methodological model by observing the local experiences of the Escolhas (“CHOICES”) Programme (CET, 2007), cognitive competencies are related to the ability to understand situations logically and objectively, interpreting social situations and positioning oneself clearly in light of them. It also includes the ability to solve problems and make decisions in a rational and controlled manner.

In celebration of 10 years of the Escolhas (“CHOICES”) Programme, the testimonies of some recipients and beneficiaries of projects across the country were compiled and published in a book (Programa ESCOLHAS, 2011). The content analysis of this book is the aim of the present work-

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The experience of individuals and factors related to their physical and social engagement may, on the one hand, promote the development of risk behaviors or, alternatively, act as factors promoting healthy and positive development. Therefore it is fundamental to strengthen healthy choices in terms of lifestyles, which must be achieved by means of a reorganization of the physical, social, cultural and economic environment. Existing literature has been interested in the study of the adaptive capacities of people in the face of adverse conditions, i.e. understanding why different individuals behave differently under the same stressful situation and use different adaptive responses. One of the concepts emerging from the studies is "resilience" (Werner & Smith, 2001). Windle (1999) defines resilience as the successful adaptation to life tasks under conditions of social disadvantage or highly adverse situations. This adaptation takes the form of a process or the result of processes that allow significant risks to be overcome (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Trzesniak, Libório, & Koller, 2011).

These risks are especially significant when they accumulate and interfere with the individuals' proper psychological and social adjustment. Research in this area has shown that the combination of four stress factors quadruples the likelihood of maladjustment in relation to the combination of three stress factors. This hypothesis, known as cumulative risk (Rutter, 1987), states that the number of risk factors seems to have more weight in the psychosocial adjustment of individuals than the actual type of problems (Simões,

Matos, Tomé et al., 2008). When this happens, it is essential to implement protective mechanisms to cope with the risk. Rutter (1984, 1987) identifies four protective processes that lead to resilience. The first process involves reducing the impact of risk factors on the individual. According to the author, this process is a crucial mechanism that may occur in two forms: by changing the meaning or the danger this factor poses to the individual, or changing the individual's exposure to risk or their close involvement with this situation. A second mechanism involves reducing the negative consequences of exposure: the consequences of exposure to risk are generally harmful, thus generating more risk. This cyclical reaction of cause-effect has adverse long-term consequences, as would be expected. Another protective process involves promoting self-esteem and self-efficacy, Rutter stressing in this context the role of safe and harmonious relationships in protecting against risk involvements, in promoting a sense of personal worth and belief in knowing how to cope successfully with the challenges that life poses. Finally, the author speaks of the opening of opportunities that often constitute turning points in individuals' lives. These opportunities may be reflected in participation in activities or programmes that promote the development of social skills and investment in prosocial activities. These opportunities may also raise expectations about the future and, simultaneously, the effort and persistence required to achieve the goals. In addition to these processes, Rutter (1984) emphasizes as crucial ingredients for resilience the ability to solve problems and the ability to deal with change.

In this context, multiple programmes have emerged with the aim of optimizing one or more aspects of personal and social skills: verbal and non-verbal communication, problem management, managing emotions, assertiveness; promoting simple and complex social skills (Matos, 2005) and, more recently, promoting resilience itself (Simões, Matos, Tomé et al., 2009a ; 2009b) or promoting self-regulation and the acquisition and maintenance of a social support network (Matos & Sampaio, 2009; Matos et al., 2011; Matos et al., 2012; Matos & Tomé, 2012 a, 2012 b).

According to Brooks (2006), resilience is an ecological phenomenon, i.e. it develops through interaction with the various contexts in which the individual functions, such as family, school, neighbours and community.

Benard's Conceptual Model for Resilience and Youth Development is precisely one of the models that are based on an ecological perspective, systematizing the interaction between the various resilience factors, such as environmental resources and internal resources (Institute of Education Sciences, 2007). According to the model, the environmental resources available in key life contexts, such as the family, school, peers and the community, promote positive outcomes in health, social and academic areas, and discourage involvement in risk behaviours, or those that impair positive development (Simões, Matos, Tomé et al., 2009a ; 2009b).

Benard (1995) highlights the importance of the following protective procedures in each of these contexts: the importance of relationships of affection with significant adults, positive and high expectations and opportunities for meaningful participation.

The emotional connection with people in meaningful contexts (father, mother, a sibling, a friend, a teacher, a caregiver) will allow the young person to obtain support for healthy development, whereby the existence of at least one support person is one of the most important factors for proper adjustment in addressing the risk.

Having high expectations is another important factor that promotes protective processes. The feeling that others expect something positive from the young person and believe that they are

capable of doing their best, leads individuals to develop self-esteem, self-efficacy, autonomy and optimism.

As a result of high expectations, opportunities for participation appear in meaningful contexts, leading to the development of a sense of belonging and responsibility and the ability to make decisions.

According to Benard's model (Institute of Education Sciences, 2007), environmental resources trigger the development of internal resources such as cooperation and communication, empathy, problem solving, self-efficacy, self-knowledge, goals and aspirations and self-esteem.

The skills of cooperation and communication are associated with flexibility in relationships, the ability to work with others, to convey information and ideas, and to express feelings and needs to others. The ability to cooperate involves mutual assistance and unity of actions to achieve common goals.

Communication skills include verbal and non-verbal behavior (posture, gestures, facial expression, etc.) paralinguistic or verbal behavior (aspects related to voice, such as speed, volume, tone, timbre, etc.) and assertive communication (dealing competently with others in situations that may create problems for oneself and for the other). Cooperation and communication competences are associated with flexibility in relationships, work team skills and assertiveness in the expression of emotions, feelings, ideas and needs (Austin & Kilbert, 2000)

Empathy involves understanding and concern for the feelings and experiences of others, and is considered a key factor for personal and social well-being. It may be divided into two types: cognitive, related to the ability to understand the viewpoint of others, and the affective, in turn related to the ability to experience emotional reactions by observing or understanding situations involving others. Empathy, the ability to understand others' feelings and perspectives, is viewed as an important aspect in the area of interpersonal functioning (Fitness & Curtis, 2005) and well-being (Wei, Liao, Ku et al., 2011).

Problem solving is understood as the ability to plan, think critically, reflect on and examine creatively various aspects before making a decision or taking any action. Problem solving skills appear to play a critical role in risk assessment, resource assessment and seeking healthier involvements or relationships, as well as in creating realistic plans, which are essential aspects for adaptation and resilience (Matos, 2005).

Self-efficacy understands feelings of personal value and belief in coping successfully with the challenges that life poses, and is decisive in how people face problems. Individuals with a strong belief in their efficacy recognize and value their skills, have more confidence to start tackling situations, make greater efforts, diversify strategies to deal with situations and persist longer in the face of obstacles and problems that arise when dealing with the problematic situations. Self-efficacy is related to people's ability to judge to what extent they will accomplish a certain level of performance (Bandura, 2001). According to Bandura, efficacy beliefs are important foundations of human action.

Self-knowledge is knowledge and understanding of ourselves, which includes understanding how certain situations may influence our behavior, feelings and mood, as well as the changes that occur. Self-knowledge thus appears to be a realization, rather than something given or readily available to the subject. In order to know oneself, one needs to analyze, reflect and interpret one's thoughts, actions and individual and social positions. Self-awareness refers to the capacity to become the object of one's own attention (Morin, 2006).

Goals and aspirations are associated with qualities such as goals for the future, motivation, expectations of a better future, a sense of anticipation and consistency. Having goals and aspirations is a crucial aspect for the active participation of adolescents in the construction of their life stories, which in turn requires intentionality, anticipation, action, regulation and evaluation. Goals and aspirations and other future oriented strengths are associated to positive outcomes in health and school context in adolescence (Benard, 2004; Simões et al., 2010). Future goals help to delay immediate gratification (Munist, et al., 1998) and the pursuing of self-concordant goals is associated to a better global mood and well-being (Sheldon & Kasser, 2001)

The key objectives of this paper are:

- 1) To identify the internal and external resources perceived by individuals arising from participation in the Escolhas Programme ("Choices") and understanding the importance/impact of participation on the various life contexts of the individuals;
- 2) To identify the resources recognized by the families and facilitators involved.

METHOD

Participants

The total sample consists of 365 subjects / testimonials included in the book commemorating the 10th anniversary of the Escolhas ("CHOICES") Programme: 149 are children and young people, 40 are relatives of the children and young people and 126 are project facilitators involved in the Escolhas ("CHOICES") Programme, plus a further 50 partners, representatives of partner organizations.

Procedures

Considering the objectives of this exploratory and descriptive study, we chose a qualitative methodology in the analysis of the information reported through 365 written testimonies. To do so, taking the categories illustrated by Benard (Institute of Education Sciences, 2007) as a starting point, a thorough reading of the written testimonies was undertaken in order to verify whether the categories mentioned by Benard matched the content of the texts, and whether new (or different) categories emerged. Illustrative excerpts of the categories were selected (Caregnato & Mutti, 2006). The excerpts thus classified were agreed by three researchers.

Data Analysis

The discourses were fully analyzed and the categories were then confirmed, based on Benard's aforementioned Conceptual Model for Resilience and Youth Development (Institute of Education Sciences, 2007), which formed the basis for analyzing the discourses.

RESULTS

The results are presented through categories of analysis containing extracts from the discourses of the participants themselves, the children and young people, families, facilitators and partners.

Internal Resources of the Young People

Included among internal resources, the following categories were considered: the capacity for cooperation and communication, empathy, problem solving, self-efficacy, self-knowledge, goals and aspirations.

Under the category capacity for cooperation, we find a discourse that reflects the concern of individuals who participated in the projects to, on the one hand, support the teams of professionals to give back the personal benefit they received, and on the other, to contribute to improving the lives of others through a common target:

"I do my part, I participate in all activities and I help other colleagues to study." (p.12)

"Today we're united in support of one target: to learn from each other". (p.15)

"I always try to do for the project as much as it did for me." (p.24)

One of the benefits of the project identified by the participants was an improved ability to communicate, both in terms of how they relate to others and greater ease in speaking of themselves and/or expressing their feelings.

"Now I can even express my feelings without crying and I strive harder to achieve my goals." (p.16)

"I've learned how to act, how to speak and how to respect my elders, which was something I'd never learned to do." (p.17)

"The project helped me to better understand the things of life and to socialize and share". (p.9)

The participants in the various projects have shown improved empathy in relation to the difficulties of others, in particular those of an economic and social nature.

"I also like being able to help those more in need than I am... helping is an unforgettable experience." (p.10)

"I always try to encourage the youngest to join the project, as it's there that they'll find opportunities, good advice and more resources to advance in their education." (p.13)

"I've improved my social interaction, today, I'm more attentive to the problems of others." (p.42)

"I've learned to put myself in the place of others, to respect other cultures and even to speak a new language." (p.45)

Individuals relate participating in the projects to the ability to solve and perceive problems, in particular at a personal, academic and professional level.

"The project helped me to better understand the things of life and to socialize more and share". (p.9)

"It helped me to grow up, changed the way I acted, and today, I have a more relaxed attitude towards problems." (p.19)

"Now, I can solve problems more easily, I'm more outgoing, lively, sociable." (p.25)

"In addition to support at school, it helped me cope with the unbearable problems I had at home and put me on a more promising career path." (p.40)

The individuals seem to consider themselves to have greater self-efficacy in solving problems, revealing in the discourses that they consider themselves agents when they need to address problems, and considering it a benefit on a personal, academic and professional level.

"I have evolved as a person and today I'm quite autonomous regarding making my own decisions, as well as dealing with the bureaucracy that we face on a day to day basis." (p. 13)

"The project helped me to discover that we are all different from each other, and we have to know how to deal with that fact." (p. 15)

"The project has changed my life and prevented me from getting into trouble." (p.17)

In relation to self-knowledge, this category is very common in the discourse of the participants and almost all individuals refer to the importance of the project in terms of the way they see themselves and the influence of the changes they have undergone on the other

areas of their lives, such as the social, academic and professional aspects.

"I learned that, only through personal effort, whether in terms of studying or working, can you be someone in life." (p.7)

"The activities to which we have access have allowed me to make solid friendships, build my place in the group, respect and be respected..." (p.10)

"It helped me to grow up, changed the way I acted, and today, I have a more relaxed attitude towards the problems." (P.19)

The individuals show a positive attitude towards the future and their aspirations, and, in some cases, can identify their personal and professional targets.

"I'm battling for a better future, as I study and work and, in parallel, I participate as a volunteer in social action projects." (p.7)

"In the future, I'd like to be able to help countries in trouble, end wars around the world and support deprived children... make a difference." (p.9)

"I am well aware of the reality that surrounds us and I know that now, while I'm young, is the ideal time to plan what I want to do with my life." (p.13)

"The project invested in me and that gave me a perspective on life, as well as a more open outlook on the world." (p.27)

"From there, I became interested in studying, set myself new targets and reassessed my goals. To have the stable life I want, I had to change my attitude". (p.37)

"In terms of school, the project motivated me achieve academic success. I failed several times and had poor results in almost all subjects. This is the first year I passed everything". (p.23)

External Resources of Young People

New opportunities, social participation and new social support networks

"In this sense, even today, I'm thankful for having had the opportunity to interact with people who instilled in me values such as tolerance and respect for differences." (p.7)

"I owe a lot to the project for having helped me to see life more clearly due to the exchanges they offered me and different regions, contributing to my personal growth." (p.20)

"This is my second home, as they always did so much for me..." (p.11)

"The project team is with us for fun, to study, to vent our frustrations, to make decisions, for everything." (p.15)

"All this was only possible with the support of the project facilitators, as it was them that referred me to a Vocational Catering Course, helped me look for a job and also develop catering workshops." (p.26)

"It's a learning space where young people and adults have access to information technology." (p.20)

"The social changes in the area are visible: parents are more present in the lives of their children, the behaviour of some children and young people has improved, everyone can access education, new prospects and life goals." (p.24)

The Escolhas ("CHOICES") Resources as Viewed by Relatives

The Escolhas ("CHOICES") Programme involves relatives in its projects together with the young people, encouraging:

(1) The promotion of affective relationships between parents and children;

(2) The creation of more positive expectations for the parents in relation to their children's future; and

(3) The young people's opportunity to participate and contribute.

According to the analysis of the discourse of relatives of the children and young people, the following categories emerge, some of which also form part of the above-mentioned model.

Affective Bonds

The discourses of the "relatives" group show that the Escolhas ("CHOICES") Programme is highly valued by the relatives.

According to this group, the Escolhas ("CHOICES") Programme promoted:

Communication

"This is noted in everything, even in the relationship with my children... I've learned to talk to them and be calmer." (p.147)

"Family dialogue has also been encouraged." (p.151)

The affective relationship:

"Now, I know how to manage the practicalities of everyday life: I've learned how to save, how to deal with the home, to act in situations of ill health, as well as to relate better with my children." (p.145)

"I've learned to be a good mother and be more attentive to their problems." (p.153)

Family participation in the children's academic life

"This project has helped us, as parents, to be more aware of how to educate our children, to provide them with a better family environment and therefore a context more conducive to studying and improving their grades." (p. 143)

"Before this project, the young people of the district didn't have any kind of activity and we had no one to turn to when we needed help with education. In my particular case, my son couldn't read and he ended up crying because he didn't want to go". (p.148)

"In my relationship with my son, everything is going better... I've also changed... I try to be more present and study with him." (p.152)

High Expectations

Self-efficacy

"My daughter is now a Community Facilitator for the Project. It gives me great pride to see this development". (p.149)

Optimism

"It is imperative that our children learn from school, friends, teachers and facilitators, in order to have a different future. Now it's possible! And I know that when we need them, they'll be there for us". (p.146)

"I don't want my children's lives to be lacking in affection and good values. I'm going to fight for it!". (p.153)

Autonomy

"... interaction within the project, the teachings of the Facilitators and the improvement in family relationships have contributed to making a positive change in their behaviour. They are more socially integrated. Families are encouraged to be more independent and, in

turn, to transmit a more confident and secure outlook to the children, raising them with more rules and setting targets". (p.143)

"The relationship I have with my daughter has been strengthened. Before, I wouldn't let her go out alone and I overprotected her, but after she joined the group, I could relax more... finally, she was participating in something useful, fun and in a safe environment. (...) It's improved a lot in this regard, and I trust her more". (p. 154).

Self-esteem

"All the activities created lead to the betterment of the children and young people assume a central role in fostering healthy development and lead them to establish their own objectives. Self-esteem increases and moral values are acquired, such as respect for others, organization and tolerance". (p.150)

Opportunities for participation

"The kids learn to deal with computers and even help adults when they have a problem and don't know how to solve it". (p. 148)

"Family dialogue is also encouraged. They share their knowledge with us and we learn too". (p. 151)

"I can now make the most of the time I'm with my daughters, and that's very rewarding... one of them has even taught me how to work with the computer". (p.152)

"My son has special needs and he can learn new activities, acquire new knowledge and visit places he's never been to. We all realize the importance of keeping leisure time occupied with activities that enrich us". (p. 145)

"My daughter is happier too. In addition to school support, the recreational learning activities have been a bonus for her". (p.157)

In the discourses of families, it is still common to find references to developing parenting skills, resources and also the importance of the project to the community.

Personal Skills of Relatives

"I learned how to act and how to do. It's been a highly valuable personal experience". (p.145)

"we are currently a community with conditions and infrastructure for children to occupy their free time in an educational and organized manner, with the help of highly competent professionals endowed with knowledge and the means to offer them ongoing support". (p.143)

"We all realize the importance of keeping leisure time occupied with activities that enrich us". (p. 145)

"Today we live in a clean house, my children walk to school, there is a family doctor and our basic needs are met". (p.146)

"Before, there were many children in the area who didn't respect their parents, or anyone else, and now they do". (p.147)

"Perhaps because of this exchange of knowledge, there is now more respect in social relationships." (p.148)

"As a working mother, I owe a lot to the project. During the recent holidays, I was working and my daughter received ongoing support that she wouldn't have otherwise had". (p.154)

"Escolhas ("CHOICES") Resources as Viewed by Facilitators

In the group of facilitators, the discourses focus on the following key themes:

- (1) The meaning of the programme,
- 2) Personal lessons,
- (3) The role or importance of the facilitator in the lives of the young people and the community, and
- (4) Their motivations.

The meaning of the programme

"The Programme has grown and evolved greatly in action and mission, and everyone involved, from the children and young people, families, facilitators, institutions, volunteers, interns, with children and young people... have also grown and evolved with the Programme.programme" (p.182)

Personal lessons

"Now at 33 I see this whole journey as grand and wonderful... it has been an experience of constant evolution and growth. The Programme has allowed me to grow professionally (challenging all my insecurities) and personally (making me a more capable person increasingly sensitive to working with children and young people)". (p. 182)

"They were 10 very intense years in my professional and personal life, as over the years I grew and learned a lot from team mates, from the projects, from the young people and from the various partners that passed through the Programme." (p. 184)

The importance of the facilitator in the lives of the young people and the community:

"The day-to-day work undertaken with the young people, their relatives, the community and society in general makes us all realize the importance of the role each can play, whatever the context. Being able to offer support, but above all, being able to follow someone side by side in solving their problems and achieving their dreams has, without doubt, proved invaluable". (p. 185)

"The lessons learned and experience that has been acquired on the ground with our communities, children, young people, family members, among others, have enabled us to establish an effective commitment with everyone, working and acting according to a logic of shared accountability and sustainability in local initiatives." (p. 187)

Motivations

"It's taken years of hard work, but they've been years filled with moments of gratification and recognition of the work we've been undertaking in conjunction with the technical teams and partners." (p.184)

"In my work, what motivates me is knowing that, through my contribution, these people have already been accepted into society. Indeed, the community I work with has already been accepted into society". (p.188)

"It motivates me to know that I'm making a difference in the lives of these young people, despite having little impact on a general level, in the small details of everyday life, I feel that these young people know we're here for them". (p. 187)

"To manage to work with them, you need to seduce them and establish different strategies to keep them motivated. Because, apart from not being easily motivated, they have more learning difficulties than the boys from outside the area, and cannot withstand". (p. 191)

"What motivates me most in this work is being able to help the children and young people in the area, because I am also one of them, despite working on the project, and I know the difficulties and needs the children and young people of the area face." (p. 193).

Escolhas ("CHOICES") Resources as Viewed by Partners

Partners are representatives from an institution outside the Escolhas (CHOICES) Programme (e.g., residents associations, chambers, business associations and training centres), which relate to the programme and participate in the projects as representatives of these institutions through a partnership.

The discourses of the Partners focus on the following key themes:

- (1) The meaning of the programme;
- (2) Impact on communities; and
- (3) Reasons for participation.

The meaning of the Escolhas ("CHOICES") Programme

"Although I haven't followed the programme since its inception, I consider it a project of great significance and of great importance within public policies related to multiculturalism and inclusion." (p. 358)

"the programme has allowed me to contribute to Equal Opportunities in the development of personal, relational, educational and professional skills and to train/develop in young people the exercise of citizenship and full rights of community participation as a factor of genuine integration into society." (p. 362).

Impact on communities

"Under our partnership, our association collaborates in conducting activities with children and young people of the area. The resident community is markedly multicultural". (p.357)

"Regardless of the city and the area, social problems are always numerous and we have to try to help people find direction in this society. (...) over these nearly 4 years we've managed to certify 75 adults (34 at secondary level and 41 at the elementary level)". (p. 359)

"Social cohesion, citizenship, education, action, solidarity, arts, pride, optimism, equality, knowledge, inclusion, innovation, partnership, belonging, cultures, volunteering, opportunities, respect, Portuguese speaking, participation, diversity,Programme". (p.363).

Reasons for participation

"In this community I'd like to leave the young people with a life plan, so that they can face/address the future in a different way." (p.357)

"It has indeed been a pleasure working with the programme team, as well as being very enriching at a professional and human level." (p. 358)

"It has been a privilege to work with these projects, because, through them, we've managed to work with varied groups and it's very rewarding to feel that somehow we've also contributed towards the social integration of so many people." (p. 359)

CONCLUSIONS

The Escolhas ("CHOICES") Programme aims for the integrated development of children and young people through positive building of their development, including social, emotional, cognitive and moral competencies. The projects seek to develop the ability to integrate feelings (emotional competencies), think (cognitive competencies) and act (behavioural competencies) in order to help children and young people succeed in achieving specific goals

that they establish and pursue. The team responsible for external assessment of the Escolhas Programme, (DINÂMIA-CET, 2012) highlights five areas of consolidated results in the following areas: 1). Widespread, generally preventive engagement in promoting school success, with results largely achieved; 2). Major engagement in and impact on personal, social and civic competencies, an area presented as promoting and providing a foundation for promoting the other results; 3). Investment in referral for vocational training and the labour market, even though the results of the latter have been hampered by a lack of employment vacancies, low qualifications and mismatches between the supply of and demand for training. This scenario requires referral to vocational training to become an end, and less of a means, for more qualified job integration; 4). A commitment to promoting digital inclusion, in some cases as a target in itself, in others as a strategy and contribution to personal, social, educational and technical empowerment; 5). Intervention in conjunction with families geared to promoting appreciation for the educational career of students and increasing their parenting skills, which, however, achieved worse than expected results, although the relative lack of outcome indicators makes

This paper sought to make a contribution to the reading of these impacts. A reading centred on the narratives of the children, young people, families, facilitators and partners who construct the Escolhas (“CHOICES”) Programme on a daily basis.

Based on Benard’s Conceptual Model for Resilience and Youth Development, analysis of the excerpts suggests positive developments geared to promoting learning, personal and social competencies, resilience, motivation and expectations for the future, interpersonal relationships and social participation.

Overall, and based on the narratives of the children, young people, families, facilitators and partners, the Escolhas (“CHOICES”) Programme was successful in terms of impact both at a personal and family level, and in terms of the other agents and scenarios involved in promoting the social inclusion of children and young people from more deprived socioeconomic backgrounds.

The Escolhas (“CHOICES”) Programme appears thus as a window of opportunity associated with the development of competencies in an environment of intra and intergenerational emotional exchange, enabling and promoting social participation and the development of realistic but positive expectations for the future. This is not about promising people “dream futures”, but allowing people “to dream of the future”, first of all providing a means “to dream of the future” and paving the way to achieving those dreams.

These acquired competencies may form the basis of citizens who, growing up with equal opportunities, will certainly be able to give practical meaning to the challenge of Amartya Sen (1999). Effectively, this means creating conditions within deprived communities that allow them to “remove restrictions that limit our ability to make free choices”. This is true freedom.

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