INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: FACTORS INFLUENCING ATYPICAL ACADEMIC PATHWAYS OF YOUTH IN PORTUGAL

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*T*his research, framed theoretically within studies on school success, aims to generate knowledge about the successful academic pathways of students at risk of school failure and social exclusion in compulsory education. Employing a qualitative approach, a multi-case study was conducted in a municipality located in the north-eastern region of Portugal, within the framework of two national education interventions: the Priority Intervention Educational Territories (TEIP) and the Choices Programme, aimed to promote school success and social inclusion in formal and non-formal educational contexts, respectively. The qualitative data involved content analysis of biographical interviews with children and young people. The findings reveal how maternal involvement, teacher recognition, and non-formal educational activities play a decisive role in reshaping atypical academic pathways, and in supporting academic success among disadvantaged youth. These results offer insights for the design of educational practices and policies that strengthen socio-educational support systems to improve school outcomes and educational quality.

Keywords: academic success; inclusive education; educational programs; formal and non-formal education.

INTRODUCTION

Educational policies at both supranational and national levels have been shaped by various discourses, such as those from the World Conferences on

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Education for All organized by UNESCO. These policies aim to universalise access to education and promote equity (UNESCO 2015; 2020), framing education as a "treasure to be discovered" (Benavente and Correia 2020). The formulation and implementation of these policies are influenced by historical and political contexts, with ideologies that can either support or hinder their fulfilment (Stoer and Magalhães 2005). In line with European guidelines, educational policies, programmes and practices in Portugal have been developed to address cultural and social diversity, focusing on promoting academic success, social inclusion, and preparing young people for the labour market (Magalhães *et al.* 2015). National initiatives such as the TEIP (1996) and Choices Programme (2001) have gained significant public and government recognition through their success and approach to education and employment interventions (Loureiro and Rodrigues 2024; Rodrigues, Silva, and Loureiro 2024). Aiming to reduce educational inequalities and address the consequences of school failure, these compensatory measures, often grounded in socio-educational practices, have helped to mitigate diverse forms of exclusion. However, they alone are insufficient to prevent the effects of cultural and social reproduction of inequalities that persists within the school environment (Carvalho and Joana 2022).

Antunes and Lúcio (2019) emphasise the importance of developing inclusive socio-educational practices to overcome learning barriers in both formal and non-formal educational settings, within broader processes aimed at promoting social inclusion and academic success. Inclusive socio-educational practices, rooted in the philosophy of inclusive education (Rodrigues 2013; Sanches 2005; UNESCO 2015), seek to develop processes that mitigate or eliminate barriers to learning and participation (Booth and Ainscow 2002), thus enhancing academic achievement and social inclusion for all students (Antunes and Lúcio 2019; Rodrigues, Amorin, and Neves 2020).

Notwithstanding progress in reducing early school leaving in the Portuguese context, the country still has high school failure rates compared to other European nations (Barros, Cordeiro, and Gama 2022). Additionally, there is limited knowledge regarding the (re)construction of atypical academic pathways from the perspectives of students from vulnerable backgrounds who participate in inclusive socio-educational practices (Antunes 2019), particularly those enrolled in compulsory education (up to 12th grade).

Grounded in a perspective that prioritises the multidimensionality of factors related to school failure, this study aimed to investigate processes and factors that promote academic success in the (re)construction of academic pathways of students enrolled in compulsory education and who participate in inclusive socio-educational practices. The article begins by presenting the theoretical framework of the study, followed by an introduction to the methodological choices and procedures that guided data collection and analysis. These elements provide the foundation for the interpretative analysis and reflection in the results' section.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The literature presents multiple designations for the academic pathways of children and young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Influential studies in sociology of education, both at national and internationally level (Antunes and Sá 2019; Costa, Lopes, and Caetano 2014; Lacerda 2006; Lahire 1997; Roldão 2015), frequently integrate perspectives from theories of social and cultural reproduction with a sociological approach at an individual level (Antunes and Sá 2019). Antunes (2019) explored various aspects, including the processes underlying successful academic pathways of children and young people engaged in inclusive socio-educational practices designed to overcome barriers to school participation and learning. These studies suggest that academic experiences are shaped by a constellation of socio-educational processes and factors within lives affected by inequalities and disadvantages (Antunes and Sá 2019). Institutional, dispositional, and situational factors (Ekstrom 1972) play also a crucial role in shaping students' experiences in socio-educational contexts and public policies designed to overcome barriers and expand institutional opportunities for educational participation (Antunes and Sá 2019). Although international literature often frames similar trajectories under the concept of 'resilient students', we opted for the concept of 'atypical academic pathways' (Antunes and Sá 2019; Roldão 2015) as it better captures the cumulative, multidimensional processes shaping educational success in disadvantaged contexts and avoids the focus on the individual. Both concepts acknowledge the capacity to overcome adversity, yet our choice emphasises the situated and relational nature of these trajectories within specific institutional and social frameworks.

This research focuses on the academic pathways of children and young people from vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds, identified as at-risk students or experiencing academic failure within compulsory education. These students participate in socio-educational practices embedded within programmes promoting academic success and social inclusion, such as TEIP and Choices Programmes. Following Antunes and Sá (2019), we align, as mentioned, with the concept of atypical academic pathways, which refers to:

> (…) academic pathways that, at some point, faced various socio-educational barriers, challenging students' participation in learning and school, and their continuity and successful completion. However, despite these obstacles, compulsory schooling has been, or is on the path to being, completed. These pathways possess an element of improbability, unexpectedness, and atypicality, as they could have taken a different course if not for the socio-educational practices and projects in which the students were involved (Antunes and Sá 2019, 72).

Rodrigues and Antunes (2021) identify four dimensions that explain the construction of atypical academic pathways: (i) family, (ii) school, (iii) non-formal education and sociability, and (iv) individual. The authors highlight the existence of diverse forms and different combinations in the prevalence of these dimensions. Within the family dimension, the significance of specific forms of family socialisation and educational styles that support young people in school is recognised (Bergier and Xypas 2013; Costa and Lopes 2008; Justino 2018; Roldão 2015; Teixeira 2010).

Other research underscores, within the school dimension, the significance of the "effect of one's past school career" (Costa and Lopes 2008) and recognition by teachers (Bergier and Xypas 2013; Costa and Lopes 2008). Regarding the non-formal education and sociability dimension, scholars highlight the relevance of young people's participation in non-formal education dynamics or groups and their sociability (Antunes and Sá 2019; Bergier and Xypas 2013; Justino 2018; Roldão 2013; 2015; Teixeira 2010).

Finally, within the individual, agency, and experience dimension, several studies emphasise, to variable degrees, the influence of individual characteristics and the capacity for agency, which emerges through the interaction between social structures and individual agency (Bergier and Xypas 2013; Costa and Lopes 2008; Justino 2018; Roldão 2015; Teixeira 2010; Xypas 2017).

Based on a vision that acknowledges the multidimensional nature of factors contributing to school failure, this study aimed to examine the processes and determinants that foster academic success in the (re)construction of students' educational trajectories within compulsory education. By engaging in inclusive socio-educational practices, these students contribute to reshaping their educational experiences, thereby advancing equity and promoting school achievement (Antunes and Sá 2019; Roldão 2015).

METHODOLOGY

This research followed a qualitative methodology and involved a multi cases study approach (Yin 2010), using biographic interviews to characterise atypical academic pathways of children and young people. A two-stage biographical interview design was adopted with each participant, at different points in time, not only to foster trust and rapport (Amado 2014), but also to enable an iterative process of narrative reconstruction (Bergier and Xypas 2013). This sequential design allowed to revisit central themes, validate and clarify previous accounts, and capture possible shifts in students' perceptions, thereby producing a more temporally anchored and credible dataset. The participants were directly involved in inclusive socio-educational practices embedded in two government programmes: the TEIP program, based in a school setting and implemented through a formal education project and the Choices Programme located in the community and

developed through a non-formal education project. Both government programmes aim to promote academic success and social inclusion.

The participants, children and young people selected by representatives from the Choices and TEIP projects, were chosen to ensure gender balance and representation across various educational stages. The gatekeepers from both TEIP and Choices Programmes were included to capture a broader spectrum of experiences within formal and non-formal educational settings, acknowledging that both could contribute differently but complementarily to the reconstruction of atypical pathways (Antunes and Sá 2019). Selection criteria required participants to: (i) have engaged in a socio-educational practice for at least one academic year, (ii) have reversed initial expectations of academic failure, and (iii) be enrolled in compulsory education (from lower to upper secondary education, having completed at least one study cycle). The Portuguese education system is structured into 1st Cycle (4 years), 2nd Cycle (2 years), 3rd Cycle (3 years) and secondary education (3 years). Compulsory schooling ends with the completion of 12 years of schooling, or between the ages of 6 to18.

Two inclusive socio-educational practices were involved: one focused on academic support within the Choices Programme (Learning Space) and another on student grouping within the TEIP programme (My Own Pace).Socio-educational practices, such as Study support seek to organise additional resources to support learning processes that reinforce academic performance, while the student grouping practices organise groups of students with relative homogeneity in terms of academic performance, seeking to make pedagogical action more effective (Antunes 2017). The TEIP programme operates within schools classified as socially and educationally disadvantaged, promoting inclusive educational measures, differentiated instruction, and strategies aimed at reducing school failure and dropout (Loureiro and Rodrigues, 2024). Choices programme, by contrast, is a community-based programme offering non-formal educational activities that foster social inclusion, personal development, and academic engagement through extracurricular and leisure dynamics (Rodrigues *et al.* 2020). Both programmes share the goal of mitigating educational inequalities, albeit through different institutional mechanisms. The names of the socio-educational practices and the interviewed children and young people are fictitious to protect the identity of the participants and their contexts.

A total of 10 participants, consisting of six girls and four boys, from 11 to 18 years old, were involved in the study. The interviewees were spread across school years from 5th to 8th grade, with a smaller number in the 11th and 12th grades. Participants' engagement in the two practices ranged from 1 to 9 years.

Parental occupations were mainly unskilled jobs (e.g. driver, painter, sales assistant), with educational levels ranging from lower secondary to upper secondary education (6th to 12th grades).

Most participants had one sibling, coming from small family units, aligning with national data from 2023, which reports an average household size of 2.3. Six participants have older siblings, and studies (e.g. Zang, Tan, and Cook 2023) suggest a positive link between older siblings' influence and younger siblings' academic success, especially in vulnerable families.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

To explore key dimensions from the research, 20 biographical interviews (two per participant) were conducted with five students from each socio-educational practice. This approach provided insight into the meanings and perceptions of children and young people attach to their educational pathways. As Bergier and Xypas (2013, 44) note, the biographical interview enables participants to reconstruct their school past, reflecting on their family background, social groups, and educational experiences, which shape their actions. Through these interviews, the study aimed to gather information to understand the multidimensional factors influencing academic pathways (Antunes and Sá 2019; Costa and Lopes 2008; Roldão 2015).

Qualitative data from student interviews were analysed using content analysis (Amado 2014; Bardin 1995), structured into categories reflecting participants' views on atypical academic pathways. Coding focused on three main categories: i) Family Dimension; ii) School Dimension and iii) Non-Formal Education and Socialization Dimension.

Interviews were conducted at the headquarters of the Choices and TEIP local projects. Ethical considerations ensured participant confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity, with parental/guardian consent obtained through informed consent forms.

ATYPICAL ACADEMIC PATHWAYS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN COMPULSORY EDUCATION: PERSPECTIVES, EXPERIENCES, AND MEANINGS

The following section is based on the content analysis of 20 interviews conducted with 10 children and young people. The analysis is structured according to the three dimensions identified as contributing to the development of successful academic pathways in compulsory education: family, school, and non-formal education and socialization.

From the perspectives of the children and young people interviewed, key aspects include valuing education, setting clear expectations for academic achievement, and fostering emotional engagement with school life, particularly through curiosity, inquiry, and a sense of belonging. These dimensions are

reinforced by supportive family dynamics, positive role models, and strong relationships with teachers and peers, all of which contribute to (re)constructing successful academic pathways.

THE FAMILY DIMENSION IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF ATYPICAL ACADEMIC PATHWAYS

One key aspect in analysing the academic pathways of the interviewed children and young people is family involvement in the school project, specifically the engagement of parents/guardians in their children's education (Costa and Lopes 2008; Cuconato and Walther 2015; Justino 2018; Roldão 2015; Teixeira 2010). The collaboration between families and schools plays a crucial role in shaping students' educational pathways and overall development.

Sociology of education has long developed social and cultural reproduction theories and concepts of educational achievement, emphasising the link between social inequalities and student success, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970). However, researchers like Lahire (1997) argue that the connection between family educational capital and academic success is not always direct, as it is influenced by an ecology of others, namely family dynamics.

From the perspectives of the children and young people interviewed, key family factors include valuing education, setting expectations for academic performance (Justino 2018; Teixeira 2010), and fostering emotional engagement with school life such as asking about daily school experiences (Justino 2018). These elements seem to contribute to their academic success.

> My parents always tell me to study more. They want me to be someone in life one day and believe studying is important. (Carolina, 13 years old, My Own Pace).

> She [my mother] always asks me how school was, how my day went. (André, 14 years old, My Own Pace).

> My parents always ask me when I have tests, what I do in class, and how school is going. (Júlia, 13 years old, My Own Pace).

This emphasis on education suggests that families recognize the school's role in creating a learning environment and creating a culture of effort (Lahire 1997) so that children can build successful academic and professional pathways, as reflected in the statements of the interviewed students:

> [My nuclear and extended family] care about my future and want me to be successful and go to university. (Pilar, 16 years old, Learning Space).

That's what my parents want as well; they want me to get good grades and go to Lisbon for the Military Academy, then do a master's degree and come back home, maybe even securing a higher professional position than my father currently holds. (André, 14 years old, My Own Pace).

My parents tell me to study so I can get a good job. (Júlia, 13 years old, My Own Pace).

My family says that if I don't study, I won't have a good job and will live a more limited life. (Gaspar, 12 years old, My Own Pace).

The perspectives of these children and young people reveal their parents' sense of sacrifice and commitment to co-constructing successful academic pathways and ensuring prolonged schooling for their children (Teixeira 2010).

[My parents] never criticize me, even when I get bad grades, but they tell me to work harder so that I don't end up like them and can get a college degree. (Carminho, 11 years old, Learning Space).

(…) my family always talks about it (…) mostly my mom, who says she regrets not having studied and securing a better future. That's why I think that since my parents didn't have that opportunity, I want to have a good future. (Diogo, 14 years old, My Own Pace).

The statements of the interviewed participants also highlight the role families play in their academic success, particularly through study support (direct or indirect), supervision of schoolwork, and access to educational resources (Roldão 2015), such as tutoring, study centres (Araújo 2006; Roldão 2015), and participation in practices like Learning Space:

Sometimes, I ask someone in my house who knows about math, like my grandmother, because she's good at math. She helps me a lot because she knows a lot about math. (Ema, 11 years old, Learning Space).

My mom didn't really need to check on me [during the first lockdown], but sometimes, during breaks or classes, she would open the door to make sure I was attending my lessons. (Carminho, 11 years old, Learning Space).

[My mother] told me right away that participating in My Own Pace would be better for me, that I would get better grades. (Diogo, 14 years old, My Own Pace).

I went to a study centre in 5th and 6th grade, but then I stopped going because I joined My Own Pace practice. (André, 14 years old, My Own Pace).

Within these families significant moments are identified, referred to in the literature as elements of instability within family structures (Teixeira 2010), abrupt domestic-family reconfigurations (Roldão 2015), biographical rupture moments

(Lahire 1997), or turning points (Nico 2012). According to Roldão (2015, 101), these moments refer to situations such as "migration, divorces, remarriages, changes of residence, but also decisive transformations in school integration, changing schools, school cycle transitions, and experiencing academic sanctions".

Family dynamics that cause instability in the lives and school pathways of the interviewed children and young people are acknowledged, influencing their academic pathways. Situations of divorce and remarriage (often leading to the father's absence from their children's lives and an increase in single-mother households), relocations, and migration are mentioned:

> It was a bit hard for me, in 4th grade, to adapt here [moving to a new residence]. And then in 5th grade too [changing schools] because it was a different and much bigger school. I never found it easy to adapt to new places. (Luísa, 18 years old, Learning Space).

> I was born in Brazil. I lived there for about eight or nine years with my parents, but they separated. I stayed with my mom. Then my mom met my stepfather, who is Portuguese, online, and he came to Brazil to meet us. They got married there. Then we all moved here, and I've been living in Portugal for almost five years now. Sometimes I cried and felt sad … sometimes I didn't really want to be with other kids because I was sad … I was in a new school, in a new country, and I stayed by myself during breaks. (Diogo, 14 years old, Learning Space).

> My whole class left last year, and they all abandoned me. Only one friend of mine, from another class, stayed at this school. (Carolina, 13 years old, My Own Pace).

> When I came from Switzerland, I spoke Portuguese very poorly because I wasn't used to it; I was used to speaking French. I stuttered a lot in class, and sometimes I couldn't find the right words. (Gaspar, 12 years old, My Own Pace).

Often, parental involvement in their children's schooling is sporadic or inconsistent throughout childhood and adolescence (Roldão 2015). However, what stands out in the analysed cases is that the parents, or the parent who retains custody, manage to overcome unfavourable conditions in the family's domestic life to ensure their children's success at school. Sometimes this is achieved by taking direct responsibility or delegating it to others, including the child themselves, older siblings, teachers, neighbours or friends:

> I think [the programme] is really good for children whose parents don't have much time to help them study. (Luísa, 18 years old, Learning Space).

> I went to a psychologist because my parents once started threatening to divorce, and at that time, I cried a lot. They decided to send me to a

psychologist. I was there for two years… it really helped me in school, with concentration, studying better, and focusing more on what I want. It also helped me ask teachers questions and not fool around in class as much. (André, 14 years old, My Own Pace).

I had tutoring in math when I came to Portugal because my mother thought I needed it, but now I stopped because of My Own Pace. (Gaspar, 12 years old, My Own Pace).

In line with the literature (Costa and Lopes 2008; Doroftei 2020; Roldão 2015; Teixeira 2010), the students mention the importance of the mother's role in supporting the schoolwork of their children. Three interviewees have no contact with their father, and three participants have only occasional contact. The remaining four participants, who live in the same household as their father, with the exception of André, indicate their mother as the main support in their academic career, perceiving her as a role model and/or a safe harbour.

My biggest support is my mother. (Pilar, 16 years old, Learning Space)

She always cared a lot about us [me and my sister Pilar] and how school was going. She always encouraged me to study. My mother is the role model I follow. (Luísa, 18 years old, Learning Space)

My mother supports me, she never compares me to my cousins, and she doesn't criticise me, but she supports and encourages me. (Carolina, 13 years old, My Own Pace)

My mother is the one who supports me the most in everything. (Júlia, 13 years old, My Own Pace)

Most participants acknowledge the active participation of mothers in school events, including parent-teacher meetings and other activities.

Generally, my mother goes to school during the meetings. First, she goes to my sister's meeting, then mine. Sometimes it's the other way around. (Pilar, 16 years old, Learning Space)

My mother goes to school sometimes because she is always working. But when she can, she talks to the teachers during the meetings. (Carolina, 13 years old, My Own Pace)

In terms of investment and school guidance strategies, families are proactive, either through direct action from the parents or by investing social capital from more socioeconomically privileged relatives and/or those with higher education levels (Roldão 2015). The presence of close figures, such as uncles, aunts, or family friends, is pointed out by most of the children and young people as positive role models in education, transmitting the importance of education and the value of

academic effort. These close figures often provide support, guidance, and advice to the participants, sharing their experiences and study strategies. In this way, they broaden the perspectives of the children and young people on educational and career possibilities, inspiring them to pursue academic goals and reconsider career options.

> I think it was also a bit of the influence of my cousins. I have older cousins. My oldest cousin is 30, and I saw her go to university, I went to her *Queima das Fitas*, and then she went to London to work. Then my cousin, her brother, studied Law and is now a great lawyer. I saw them studying and I wanted to be like them. (Pilar, 16 years old, Learning Space).

> My godmother helped me study. I would go to her house on Sundays when my mom was working. She encouraged me to study and was right there next to me. And then I also knew that I needed to study if I wanted to be someone in the future, I needed to study willingly. (Luísa, 18 years old, Learning Space).

> I have the help of my aunt, who is a teacher, and when I study at home with her, she explains things well. (Carolina, 13 years old, My Own Pace).

> My aunt, who is a nurse, is a good role model to follow. She tells me stories about when she was studying, how she had to study hard to get good grades, and she often encourages me to study. (Gaspar, 12 years old, My Own Pace).

The mobilisation of families around the school project (Costa and Lopes 2008; Lahire 1997; Roldão 2015), the valorisation of school, teachers, study practices (Justino 2018; Teixeira 2010), and the proximity of figures with higher levels of schooling (Roldão 2015) are considered by the children and young people as important factors in the (re)construction of their academic pathways towards success.

THE SCHOOL DIMENSION IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF ATYPICAL ACADEMIC PATHWAYS

In the research context, schools maintain communication with families, sharing information about students' academic and attitudes' progress to involve them in the educational process (Antunes and Sá 2019). Literature highlights this type of monitoring and guidance as a key factor in the development of atypical academic pathways (Antunes and Sá 2019; Roldão 2015). This guidance includes the follow up of academic performance, identifying challenges, and offering personalised support to promote school progress (Antunes and Lúcio 2019; Antunes and Sá 2019). This approach is evident in the My Own Pace student grouping practice and other socio-educational initiatives, such as Converge practice

(student grouping practice based on their academic performance in class levels, in the school subjects of Maths and Portuguese Language), tutoring, mentoring, and additional supports identified by participants as contributing to their academic success.

> Since my class has always been a bit weak in terms of grades, students were always chosen for extra support. I liked going because it was always helpful for studying. (Luísa, 18 years old, Learning Space)

> In the 7th grade, I went to My Own Pace [maths subject]. The teachers introduced the idea to the students with more difficulties... and also to the parents... [and] they explained that we would go to a separate class with another teacher who would go through the subject more slowly so that we could follow better and get better grades. (Diogo, 14 years old, My Own Pace).

> In my 1st year, I was with some classmates at a table with another teacher. (Carolina, 13 years old, My Own Pace).

> I also attend the Tutoring sessions [once a week] to catch up on any homework or to organize my notebooks. (André, 14 years old, My Own Pace).

> I attended the Converge practice in 5th and 6th grade, for Portuguese language and math. (Júlia, 13 years old, My Own Pace).

Practices promoted by the school that aim to mediate and resolve conflicts between students and foster a safe school environment are identified by the interviewed children and young people. Guidance and support to deal with socio-emotional issues such as anxiety, bullying, stress management, and the development of interpersonal and emotional skills are also pointed out in interviews by some children and young people.

> Sometimes I didn't feel very happy because there was a boy who bullied me. I talked to my mom, talked to his teachers, and talked to his dad. I also spoke with the principal. Then he changed because they also bullied him, so he realised it wasn't a good thing to do and stopped. (Ema, 11 years old, Learning Space)

> Once a week, every Thursday, in the Assembly the teacher gives us little papers and then we write about what went wrong [during the week]. Then the teacher reads them, and we try to reach an agreement so that it doesn't happen again. For example, the boys used to throw pinecones at the girls, but it was just for fun. And now they don't do that anymore because of the Assembly. (Carminho, 11 years old, Learning Space)

I had a fight with a classmate, and we went to the Student Support Office to solve the problem, and we resolved it. (André, 14 years old, My Own Pace)

The voices of the participants express appreciation for the school, teachers, and study methods that promote a respectful and committed environment and encourage the adoption of habits and strategies to promote academic success (Justino 2018; Teixeira 2010).

I liked math today because we went outside to take pictures of geometric shapes to send to the app we have. The teacher installed it. We were looking at and editing those photos and writing during class. That class was cool, and also another one where we had an activity to guess paths in math. Those classes were fun. (Carminho, 11 years old, Learning Space)

[My Own Pace] is a more individualised teaching, for example, when we have a doubt, it is well answered, and since there are few students, there is little noise, so we can concentrate better and learn the subjects better. (Gaspar, 12 years old, My Own Pace)

The importance of recognition of teachers' work, effort, and contributions to school dynamics is also identified by children and young people as a very important factor in consolidating their academic success (Bergier and Xypas 2013; Costa and Lopes 2008).

The teachers think I am the best-behaved in the class because I'm very shy, so I stay quiet. (Ema, 11 years old, Learning Space)

Today, the science teacher was looking at me and talking to me at the same time, saying that I was well-behaved, that I didn't talk back to the teacher, that I was well-educated. (Carminho, 11 years old, Learning Space)

There was a test I did, and I managed to get an Excellent grade, and I had never gotten Excellent in Math before, and I managed to do it because of My Own Pace. And in Portuguese language too, the teacher said that at the beginning of the term I had difficulties, but that I improved a lot, especially in writing. (Diogo, 14 years old, My Own Pace)

For example, in 5th and 6th grade we had Music, and I really liked it. The teacher even told me I was a good student, and it was a subject that I had an interest in. (André, 14 years old, My Own Pace)

The positive influence these educational agents have is highlighted in the voices of children and young people as an element that promotes their development and academic success. Reference figures or "helpers," in the words of Bergier and Xypas (2013, 55), may be:

(…) teachers, coordinators, school psychologists, supervisors (...) What characterises these people is that, in addition to having academic qualifications and an intimate relationship with the culture legitimised by the school, they know the school system from the inside (the obstacles, the ways of overcoming them, the scholarship offers, the formal and informal rules of the system) and will make the student benefit from these resources. The help of these professionals allows the young person to take advantage of the opportunities that arise.

Cuconato and Walther (2015, 283) argue that the construction of educational pathways is supported by different interacting factors, including the presence of "significant others":

According to an interactionist perspective, educational pathways are neither structurally determined nor are they the result of individual (rational) choice. Instead, they emerge from complex negotiation processes between young people and intervening others, particularly teachers and parents, and imply different levels of action and meaning making.

The "significant others" play a crucial role by providing emotional support, guidance, positive behaviour models, and learning opportunities that impact educational pathways and well-being (Antunes and Sá 2019; Roldão 2015; Rodrigues et al. 2020), through privileged relationships with teachers or staff, as mentioned in the narratives of the children and young people involved in the practices studied.

One of the staffs knows my brother, who went to school there, and she really likes him, so I get along very well with her. She is very good to me and always helps me when I need it. (Carminho, 11 years old, Learning Space)

[The Portuguese language teacher from My Own Pace] when we need her, she never gives up on us, and since we are few students, she can explain the subject better and very well. I really like her. (Carolina, 13 years old, My Own Pace)

I had a Portuguese language teacher [in Switzerland] who helped me a lot with French because I made mistakes, and she explained the subject to me in Portuguese, and not all teachers do that. (Gaspar, 12 years old, My Own Pace)

Children and young people point to the influence that the effects of their own educational pathways (Costa and Lopes 2008) have on their personal and socio-emotional development, as well as on their academic success. Specifically, one of the positive experiences identified in the literature concerns, according to Bergier and Xypas (2013, 52),

(...) the experience of the 'good grade' is what differentiates them, what distinguishes them from other members of the class, such as hearing the teacher read an excerpt from their work as a benchmark for the other students; seeing the object they made in the workshops of their vocational school, displayed to the public on visiting day, etc. These so-called 'good grade' experiences increase the likelihood of overcoming the next educational obstacle and justify the prediction of an increase in aspirations to continue the journey.

The significant (positive) memories can still include the influence of past experiences, transitions between educational levels, interactions with teachers and peers, and the way the educational pathways shapes the attitudes, motivation, and academic performance of the student.

When I was at that table [a group of students with difficulties], I managed to finish first [the exercise], to get all the answers right, and I was so happy. (João, 12 years old, Learning Space)

I had a math test with a good grade. I was really happy, and my parents were too. It was in the 3rd term, and I got a good grade. (André, 14 years old, My Own Pace)

Regarding the integrative nature of early school contexts that arises from the dynamics between students and the school, which includes social interactions, student engagement in school activities, and institutional support offered in the first years of school experiences, this is indicated by children and young people as an element that helps build successful academic pathways,

My teacher was very kind, and when I had some difficulties, especially with worksheets, she explained in a way that I could remember the answer. And many teachers don't do that. She also liked to play with me during breaks when I was alone. I felt sad, thinking no one wanted to be my friend, and she came to play with me. (Ema, 11 years old, Learning Space)

I really liked her [1st grade teacher]. She still calls me on my birthday. She still has my drawings at the school. (Luísa, 18 years old, Learning Space)

In the 4th grade, I got a good grade [on a Portuguese language test], but later the teacher, I think, saw my effort and raised my grade to an Excellent. I remember that in that class there was a board with the class news, and they put on it that I had managed to get an Excellent in Portuguese language, and I was so happy. (Diogo, 14 years old, My Own Pace)

I remember, since I had already been to preschool at that school with my classmates, it was basically just changing rooms and teachers. I had the best

teacher, which was Teacher Inês, and I liked her 100%. (Carolina, 13 years old, My Own Pace)

These findings contribute to the theoretical dialogue on the tension between agency and structure (Antunes and Sá 2019; Lahire 1997), highlighting how young people's pathways are shaped by agency that is relational and situated. Rather than merely reproducing structural inequalities, these trajectories show potential for transformation through interaction with significant educational agents, in line with the frameworks proposed by Cuconato and Walther (2015) and Roldão (2015). The monitoring and guidance of students and their families by the school, the appreciation of the school, teachers, and study practices, the recognition by teachers, the influence of positive experiences, the role of educational agents as reference figures, the effects of the educational journey itself, and the exclusionary or integrative nature of early school contexts emerge from the experiences and perspectives of children and young people as important factors in building their successful academic pathways.

THE DIMENSION OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION AND SOCIABILITY'S IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF ATYPICAL ACADEMIC PATHWAYS

The participation of the interviewed children and young people in non-formal education dynamics or sociability groups seems to contribute to the construction of atypical academic pathways (Antunes and Sá 2019; Bergier and Xypas 2013; Justino 2018; Roldão 2013; 2015; Teixeira 2010). Through participation in activities developed by the Choices project, children and young people involved in Learning Space point to dynamics that provide complementary learning opportunities and promote socio-emotional skills,

> Being here after classes is like an escape from the pressure of school. We talk, play, and even study in a more relaxed way, without the pressure of 'you have to do this, you have to do that.' Here, they help us, encourage us. (Luísa, 18 years old, Learning Space)

> We do activities, visit museums, in the summer we have the summer camp, and we go to the pool. (João, 12 years old, Learning Space)

The support of third parties who are "well-intentioned" and socially better positioned within the educational system and society (Roldão 2015), such as the support provided by the technicians at Learning Space, is referenced by the participants engaged in those practices as a very important factor in building their academic pathways, offering guidance and support networks that promote their academic success,

(...) they help me not to give up, I think it's good because when they trust us and help us overcome our difficulties, it's easier." (Ema, 11 years old, Learning Space)

There was a person who worked here, she left, I really liked her. And I also did study activities with her; she played with us a lot and helped me a lot on a more personal level. (Carminho, 11 years old, Learning Space)

There was a very memorable moment when I arrived there [Learning Space] crying because I didn't understand anything from the subject for the test the next day, and they sat with me for two hours to study until I understood the subject. I went to the test and got a good grade. (Luísa, 18 years old, Learning Space)

The voices of the interviewees also highlight specific aspects related to the influence of positive experiences of contact and immersion in a distinct social and cultural environment (Roldão 2015) as important elements in the construction of successful academic pathways. Children and young people mention extracurricular activities outside the domestic sphere, such as spending time with friends and participating in groups and/or activities (e.g., sports groups, church groups, among others) that place them in a different social environment, as described in the interviews,

Since my first year until the 10t^{h} grade, I've always been in catechesis. I was always used to going to mass every Sunday. My grandmother is very religious, and we go to mass every Sunday with her. I've always been used to it and always liked it. So, I think it's a good way to help with catechesis and be with other people. (Luísa, 18 years old, Learning Space)

I like to play football with my friends, ride my bike, and I also go to the gym... it's cool, and I always meet new people. (André, 14 years old, My Own Pace)

I used to do dance because I love dancing and I'm good at it, but I stopped because of the pandemic. (Carolina, 13 years old, My Own Pace)

I've been part of the school football club for 3 years. Since I came from Switzerland. (Gaspar, 12 years old, My Own Pace)

In a nutshell, participation in non-formal education dynamics or sociability groups of young people (Antunes and Sá 2019; Bergier and Xypas 2013; Justino 2018; Roldão 2013; 2015; Teixeira 2010), interaction with third parties who are "well-intentioned" and socially better positioned within the educational system and society (Roldão 2015), and the influence of positive experiences, the "cultural mix" experience (Bergier and Xypas 2013), are pointed out by children and young people as relevant factors in the (re)construction of successful academic pathways.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study focused on identifying processes and factors that aim to contribute to overcome school failure and to promote social inclusion of children and young people. The research was empirically dedicated to inclusive socio-educational practices developed in the scope of twonationwide government educational programmes: the TEIP and the Choices programmes. Content analysis of biographic interviews with participants engaged in these practices, designed to promote academic success and social inclusion, was conducted.

The analysis highlighted the crucial role of the family dynamics. The involvement of parents in their children's education contributes significantly to constructing successful academic pathways. Families' valuing of education, promoting a culture of effort, setting academic expectations, and supporting study (directly or indirectly) through task supervision or providing educational resources were identified as key factors (Costa and Lopes 2008; Cuconato and Walther 2015; Justino 2018; Roldão 2015; Teixeira 2010).

Regarding academic pathways, moments of disruption, such as divorce, remarriage, relocation, or migration (Roldão 2015), were seen as significant. Despite these challenges, families and participants managed to overcome them and keep education as a priority investment in their lives. The mother's role in supporting their children's academic pathways was emphasized as a critical factor in promoting successful academic pathways (Costa and Lopes 2008; Doroftei 2020; Roldão 2015; Teixeira 2010).

The data also revealed that families actively engage in their children's education, either directly or benefiting from social capital from relatives with higher education or better socio-economic status (Roldão 2015). These figures (e.g., uncles, grandparents, family friends) serve as positive role models, promoting the value of education and academic effort.

In the educational realm, schools were found to establish communication channels with families, sharing information on academic and attitudes progress. This fosters family involvement, which can support the development of successful academic pathways (Antunes and Sá 2019; Roldão 2015). Educational guidance includes regular monitoring of students' academic performance and support for socioemotional issues and interpersonal skill development.

The recognition of students' work and effort by teachers plays a vital role in promoting success. Teachers' positive influence is fundamentalto students' development, providing emotional support, guidance, and role models for positive behaviour (Antunes and Sá 2019; Bergier and Xypas 2013; Costa and Lopes 2008; Cuconato and Walther 2015; Rodrigues et al. 2020; Roldão 2015). According to the children and young people in the study, social interactions, engagement in activities, and institutional support in the early years are key elements for building successful academic pathways.

Participation in non-formal education activities, such as those in the Choices practice (Learning Space practice), was found to contribute to successful academic pathways by providing complementary learning and promoting socioemotional skills (Antunes and Sá 2019). The data also emphasised the importance of support from well-intentioned third parties, who are better positioned socially within the educational system, providing guidance and support networks that enhance academic success (Roldão 2015).

The findings highlight the multiple factors that help overcome school failure and build atypical academic pathways. These factors involve students, families, teachers, specialised professionals, educational and community institutions, and policies, all within the student's context. This process is dynamic and interactive (Antunes and Sá 2019; Barros et al. 2022; Costa and Lopes 2008; Roldão 2015).

This research featuresthe importance of multi-level educational policies that promote parental engagement, strengthen teacher-student relationships, and support non-formal educational initiatives. Programs fostering relational trust, recognition, and differentiated pedagogies should be prioritised, especially in socioeconomically vulnerable contexts. These findings underline that successful academic pathways are co-constructed through interconnected institutional, familial, and community supports

Future research will explore students' perspectives on the effects of socio-educational practices on their academic pathways, aiming to deepen understanding the link between participation in these practices and educational success.

Acknowledgments

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*A*ceastă cercetare, încadrată teoretic în studiile privind succesul școlar, are ca scop generarea de cunoștințe despre parcursurile academice de succes ale elevilor expuși riscului de eșec școlar și excluziune socială în învățământul obligatoriu. Folosind o abordare calitativă, a fost realizat un studiu de caz multiplu într-o municipalitate situată în regiunea de nord-est a Portugaliei, în cadrul a două intervenții educaționale naționale: Teritoriile Educaționale de Intervenție Prioritară (TEIP) și Programul Choices, care vizează promovarea succesului școlar și a incluziunii sociale în contexte educaționale formale și non-formale, respectiv. Datele calitative au implicat analiza conținutului interviurilor biografice cu copii și tineri. Rezultatele relevă modul în care implicarea maternă, recunoașterea profesorilor și activitățile educaționale non-formale joacă un rol decisiv în remodelarea parcursurilor academice atipice și în sprijinirea succesului academic în rândul tinerilor defavorizați. Aceste rezultate oferă informații utile pentru elaborarea de practici și politici educaționale care să consolideze sistemele de sprijin socio-educativ pentru a îmbunătăți rezultatele școlare și calitatea educației.

Cuvinte-cheie: succes academic; educație incluzivă; programe educaționale; educație formală și non-formală.