

Inclusion of youngsters from vulnerable socio-economic context: the “Choice Program” in Portugal

By Pietro Santilli, Network of Education Policy Centers



Brussels – SIRIUS’ member High Commission for Migration in Portugal (ACM) received on May 3rd and 4th several other SIRIUS’ members and stakeholders for the SIRIUS Peer Learning Activity, promoted by ACM and the University of Porto (CIIE). The peer learning activity was organised in the frame of the SIRIUS network fourth (besides SIRIUS watch, SIRIUS national round tables and SIRIUS annual meetings) course of actions, dedicated to the exploration of the most interesting policies and practices for migrants’ education in Europe.

At the centre of the delegation visit was the presentation of the “Programa Escolhas”/“Choice Program”, a government national programme created in 2001, managed by the Portuguese High Commission for Migration, with the mission of promoting the social inclusion of children and young people from vulnerable socio-economic contexts, aiming at equality of opportunities and strengthen social cohesion. Currently, the program is financing 112 local projects.

The Choice Program is recognised as one of the most effective public policies to promote the social inclusion of children and young people from vulnerable socio-economic context and descendants of immigrants. Over the years, it was granted with several awards.



Pedro Calado, High Commissioner for Migration, explained the Portuguese migration context: «In Portugal, 3.8% of the populations consists of foreigners, below the EU average. However, if you consider the migration background, 10% of people are descendants of migrants or refugees. Historically, it is a “mix” of different ethnicities». The approach to migration is somewhat unique in Europe: «The High Commission for Migration is an umbrella organisation, - Calado added - referring directly to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, and it is an inter-ministerial body, in which the interior, health, labour, and

education ministries are integrated. The 80% of Portuguese citizens recognise the effort made by the government towards integration and there is no political party strongly advocating against it».

The Choice Program foresees five strategic areas of intervention and measures: education and training (school inclusion and non-formal education, professional training and qualification); employability and employment; participation, civic and community rights and duties; digital inclusion and empowerment and entrepreneurship. The projects financed through the Program need to assure interventions on at least three areas out of five. The Program aims at tackling several issues, such as school dropout, unemployment and deviant behaviour of vulnerable groups. Each project has a community engager among its staff, usually a former participant. The Program tries to permeate four domains: the individual sphere, the community, the family and the school.

The coordination of the Program supports the implementation and monitors the results: the internal assessment consists of reports, evaluations (with «check-list and quantitative measures, such as the presence of the participants to trainings») and four visits a year carried out by coordination staff. Projects managers have also to report the activities and their duration in an on-line platform on daily basis.

Two Program projects in the Lisbon area were visited: +XL Project – E6G (LX-015), started in March 2016 (running until December 2018), based in Almada, and INOVAR 3 “E” Project – E6G (LX-040), started in April 2016 (running until December 2018), based in Casal de Cambra. The visiting teams had the chance to have focus group interviews with implementing and managing practitioners, representatives from the consortiums and with the beneficiaries of the practice.

The +XL Project main goal is to increase the socio-emotional, cognitive and moral skills of the children, young people and families with parental roles that live in ADSL intervention area, in order to promote equal opportunities.

The project pivots around the community centre “Centro Sociocultural de Santo António” that serves as a meeting and helping point for the participants. Since March 2016 until December 2017, the project already involved 838 participants, out of which 721 were children and young people and 117 familiars. Out of the 721 children and young people, 227 are immigrant descendants. Participants attend the centre to do sports and play, but also to hang out with peers, to talk to the social worker and the psychologist, to get learning support, and to discuss sensitive life issues and, if there is the need, to seek for specific support.

The INOVAR 3 “E” Project Promote aims at fostering social inclusion, school success and the development of innovative educational and training activities, through a solid link between schools and enterprises, in order to stimulate the full and effective integration of children and youngsters in school and in the society as active citizens. Since April 2016 until December 2017, the project already involved 389 participants, out of which 317 were children and young people, 59 familiars and 13 other participants. Out of the 317 children and young people, 211 are immigrant descendants.

Participants in INOVAR 3 find dancing, sewing, learning support (studying, homework) opportunities, a music studio, electronics, aeromodelling, 3d modelling, alternative energies and drone workshops, sports (tennis, basket, table tennis) fields, counselling and mentoring, job shadowing and career advising. Technology is perceived as crucial by the project management and it is at the core of the “Professions laboratory”, an activity that promotes learning dynamics and the development of personal, social, technical and pre-professional school skills.

Currently the Choice Program it is in its 6th generation (running until December 2018). Throughout its different generations, the Choice Program has been financed by the State Budget as well as from Structural Funds, by the Human Potential Operational Programme (POPH) and the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), under Portugal 2020.