

Inclusive Leadership Under the Scope of the External School Evaluation Program in Portugal

Jennifer Silva, University of Aveiro, Portugal
Diana Oliveira, University of Aveiro, Portugal
Alexandre Ventura, University of Aveiro, Portugal

The Barcelona Conference on Education 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In Portugal, within the scope of New Public Management, school autonomy has been reinforced, and school leaders are being held more accountable for adopting inclusive responses tailored to students' diversity and individual needs. Since 2018, the third cycle of the External School Evaluation Program (PAEE) has been underway, conducted by the Inspectorate-General of Education and Science (IGEC), to verify the implementation of educational policies and promote continuous improvement. This cycle differs from previous ones by, among other aspects, emphasizing teaching and learning processes, incorporating the observation of academic practices, and including in its Reference Framework topics such as “equity” and “inclusion.” This study, situated within the interpretative paradigm and of a qualitative nature, aims to understand how inclusion policies are implemented by school leadership through an analysis of reports produced by IGEC and a literature review. Data were processed through content analysis, with the MAXQDA software used to support the evaluation of external assessment reports conducted in 2023/2024, focusing on public non-higher education institutions in the central region of Portugal. The analysis centered on the "Leadership and Management" domain of the Reference Framework, covering three categories defined by IGEC: i. Obtained ratings; ii. Strengths; iii. Areas for improvement. The results generally highlight the recognition of the work carried out by leadership and management in promoting an inclusive school, with strengths outweighing areas for improvement.

Keywords: External School Evaluation Program, Educational Policies, Inclusive Education, School Leadership, Portugal

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Since 2018, the central administration and school organizations in Portugal have intensified their commitment to inclusive education to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda. The legal framework for inclusive education¹ calls on school organizations to foster a school culture where all students have equitable opportunities to learn and actively participate in school life regardless of their characteristics.

Inclusive education has become a priority in government policies, embracing an approach that values student diversity. It advocates for teaching methods tailored to each student's individuality, prioritizing differentiated pedagogical strategies. Similarly, it recommends that all students, regardless of their profiles and needs, be educated within the same school environment, promoting inclusion and equity. In this context, all students have been integrated into regular education, including those who require special education support, to ensure access to the curriculum and learning (Lopes & Oliveira, 2021; Sá & Raposo, 2022).

Inclusion is a process that presents significant challenges to school leadership, both at the top and intermediate levels, as it positions the curriculum and the learning of all students at the core of school activities, necessitating profound structural and pedagogical changes (Ainscow, 2020; Bolívar, 2019). According to Lourenço-Gil et al. (2020) and Santos (2019), leadership has shifted its focus to internal factors influencing learning. The director² of each school group or standalone school is now seen as responsible for implementing and contextualizing policies defined by the central administration. This includes the responsibility to drive and promote inclusive intermediate leadership that values and respects student diversity, emphasizing the continuous improvement of teaching and learning processes.

Inclusive policies emphasize adapting educational responses to ensure all achieve the Profile of Students upon Completion of Compulsory Education (PASEO). It is the school's responsibility to identify students' barriers to learning and develop "strategies to overcome them," aiming "to ensure that each student has access to the curriculum and learning" (Preamble, Decree-Law no. 54/2018, of July 6).

To monitor the implementation of educational policies and generate improvements, the third cycle of the PAEE has been underway since 2018, directed by the IGEC. It differs from previous cycles by emphasizing teaching and learning processes and valuing the promotion of equity and inclusion for students (Fialho et al., 2020). The introduction of direct observation of educational and teaching practices by a team of evaluators, composed of IGEC inspectors and external experts, who may be higher education teachers or researchers, has been implemented. During this observation, which encompasses different levels of education, attention is focused on pedagogical interaction, the competencies addressed, and the promotion of inclusion for all students (Lopes & Oliveira, 2021; Nogueira et al., 2019).

This study focuses on the third cycle of the External Evaluation Program for Schools (PAEE) due to its emphasis on promoting inclusive education. The objective is to understand how inclusion policies are implemented by school leadership through the analysis of external

¹ In English: Decree-Law no. 54/2018, of July 6, amended by Law no. 116/2019, of September 13 | In Portuguese: Decreto-Lei n.º 54/2018, de 6 de julho, alterado pela Lei n.º 116/2019, de 13 de setembro.

² In Portugal, Decree-Law no. 75/2008, of April 22, with the amendments from Decree-Law no.137/2012, of July 2, highlighted the role of the school director in implementing educational policies and promoting intermediate leadership.

evaluation reports available on the IGEC website concerning public non-higher education institutions evaluated in 2023/2024 in the central region of mainland Portugal. The "Leadership and Management" domain from the Framework of Reference for this Program was prioritized (IGEC, 2023). The defined research question is: *"How was the implementation of inclusion policies evaluated by the IGEC in 2023/2024 by school leadership, particularly regarding the classifications obtained, the strengths, and the areas for improvement identified in the PAEE reports?"*

The methodology adopted will be described following the presentation of the research question that guides this study and its objective. This section will detail the procedures used, followed by the presentation and subsequent analysis of the collected data. The article concludes with some final considerations, highlighting recommendations from this study and suggesting areas for future research.

Methodology

This study obtained data through document analysis of external school evaluation reports available on the IGEC website.³ The selected reports pertained to public non-higher education institutions in the central region of mainland Portugal, evaluated in 2023/2024. Reports related to private and cooperative schools were excluded.

To ensure data protection, the analyzed reports were coded using nomenclature such as E01, E02, and so forth. This procedure aims to maintain the anonymity of the involved institutions and follow ethical standards of confidentiality and privacy in data handling for research.

Based on the interpretative paradigm and following a qualitative approach, a content analysis of the reports was conducted, identifying patterns and trends in the inclusive practices adopted by non-grouped schools and school clusters evaluated. Regarding the Reference Framework of the PAEE (IGEC, 2023), the analysis focused on "Leadership and Management." The content analysis prioritized three a priori categories (Bardin, 2016), which, in this case, were defined by IGEC: i. Obtained ratings; ii. Strengths; and iii. Areas for improvement.

The authors used MAXQDA software to code and organize the data, facilitating the content analysis of the analyzed reports. Patterns and trends in leadership and management practices focused on school inclusion were identified. Specific codes were assigned to each of the three analyzed categories, structuring the interpretation of the data and facilitating the subsequent discussion of the results.

Two independent researchers analyzed the data and performed the coding autonomously. Discrepancies were later discussed in consensus sessions to harmonize interpretations and ensure consistency of the results (Amado, 2017).

In addition to analyzing the documents of the IGEC reports, a literature review was conducted on inclusive leadership practices in Portugal over the past six years. This process allowed for a comparison between the evidence found in the IGEC reports and the theoretical principles discussed in national studies, providing a contextualized view of the observed trends.

³ Website da IGEC: <https://igec-aeec.site/index.php>

Results

According to the data provided on the IGEC website, it was found that in 2023/2024, 21 public institutions of non-higher education in the central region of mainland Portugal were evaluated. An analysis of the reports produced by IGEC revealed that in the area of "Leadership and Management," there were two institutions rated as "Excellent" (E4 and E19), 17 rated as "Very Good" (E01, E02, E03, E05, E06, E07, E08, E09, E10, E11, E12, E14, E15, E16, E17, E18, E21), and two rated as "Good" (E13 and E20). In percentage terms, approximately 81% (n=17) were classified as "Very Good," 9.5% (n=2) as "Good," and an equal percentage and number (n=2) as "Excellent." There were no ratings of "Sufficient" or "Insufficient," which indicates that in all evaluated schools, the strengths outweighed the areas for improvement.

Table 1 summarizes the results of the "Strengths" category, including the defined subcategories of analysis. A brief description of each subcategory and a coded reference to the evaluated educational institutions corresponding to these subcategories are provided.

Table 1: Strengths - Defined Subcategories, Descriptions, and Corresponding Educational Institutions

Defined Subcategories	Descriptions	Educational Institutions
School Guiding Documents	Clarity and coherence of the documents, particularly the Educational Project. Presentation of the curricular options and their contribution to the development of the competency areas outlined in the Student Profile upon Completion of Compulsory Education (PASEO).	E01, E02, E03, E04, E05, E06, E10, E11, E12, E13, E14, E17, E18, E19, E21
Strategic Vision	Clear definition of the vision that underpins the school's actions aimed at achieving the PASEO and the principles of inclusive education.	All (E01 to E21)
School Leadership ⁴	Coordinated action between leadership and mobilization of the educational community. Focus on improving the quality of educational service and promoting inclusive and innovative projects.	E02, E03, E04, E05, E06, E07, E08, E09, E10, E11, E12, E14, E15, E16, E17, E19, E21
Continuous Training of Professionals	Continuous training for teaching and non-teaching staff, positively impacting pedagogical action and the implementation of diverse measures that promote an inclusive school environment.	E04, E10, E11, E19
Inclusive School Environment	Promotion of management practices aimed at creating an inclusive, safe, and challenging learning environment that fosters commitment and involvement from all in the life of the school.	E01, E04, E06, E13, E15, E19, E20

⁴ School Leadership: Refers to teachers who hold management positions, namely the Director (top leadership) and Coordinators (intermediate leadership).

Management and Organization of Children and Students	Application of pedagogical criteria in the formation and management of groups/classes.	E04, E10, E19
Management of Physical and Human Resources	Adequate distribution of teaching service and physical spaces, positively influencing the school environment, promoting educational success and inclusion.	E04, E05, E06, E08, E10, E12, E18, E19
Projects	Development of innovative and inclusive activities and projects, impacting the holistic development of children and students.	E02, E03, E04, E07, E09, E11, E12, E14, E16, E17, E19, E20, E21
Partnerships	Diversification of partnerships to address the needs of students, especially those benefiting from support measures for learning and inclusion.	E01, E02, E03, E04, E07, E09, E11, E12, E14, E16, E17, E19, E20, E21

Source: Own elaboration.

Next, Table 2 presents the results of the "Areas for Improvement" category. Similarly, it includes the defined analysis subcategories and a brief description of each and the assessed schools corresponding to those subcategories.

Table 2: Areas for Improvement - defined subcategories, descriptions, and corresponding Educational Institutions

Defined Subcategories	Descriptions	Educational Institutions
School Leaderships	Shared responsibility of middle management in improving pedagogical practices and intensifying collaborative work.	E01, E13, E18, E20
Internal and External Communication	Improvement of communication channels with members of the educational community. Provision of relevant information and guiding documents from the school on the website of the educational organization.	E02, E05, E10, E11, E13, E20
Goals for Educational Outcomes	Need to define goals as guiding references for teaching work and the reflection of management, administration, and educational coordination and pedagogical supervision bodies.	E03, E06, E12, E17
School Guiding Documents	Definition of quantifiable goals in the Educational Project, aligned with student performance, to reinforce the coherence of the guiding documents and enhance the monitoring of organizational progress.	E07, E08, E09, E15, E16, E20
Cooperation and Involvement of the Educational Community	Integration of the participation of parents, guardians, and non-teaching staff in the Annual Activity Plan.	E01, E13, E20

Non-teaching Staff	Implementation of a strategy to encourage recognition of the role of non-teaching staff in the development of the school organization.	E13
Continuous Professional Development	Definition of a Training Plan for teaching and non-teaching staff.	E02, E05, E13, E17, E21
Reorganization of Student Schedules	Need for schedules to include divisions of classes in the subjects of Physical Chemistry and Natural Sciences to enhance experimental work.	E06
Multiculturalism of Students	Appreciation of multiculturalism in internal educational dynamics.	E14

Source: Own elaboration.

Discussion

In Portugal, the Ministry of Education has granted schools greater administrative and curricular autonomy, leading to external school evaluations as part of decentralization and accountability policies (Afonso, 2010; Oliveira, 2017; Ventura, 2006). According to Law no. 31/2002,⁵ of December 20, which regulates the evaluation system for education and non-higher teaching in Portugal, the evaluation process requires an integrated and contextualized analysis of the results. In the external evaluation of schools, the results are presented in a report produced by the IGEC for each evaluated school, summarizing the information collected based on a methodology established by the inspection. Methodology⁶ is publicly available and was previously communicated to the director of the educational organization being evaluated.

During the analysis of the reports, it was found that in the institutions classified as "Excellent" (E04 and E19), in the domain of Leadership and Management, no areas requiring improvement were identified, with only strengths highlighted. These institutions stand out in all analyzed subcategories, particularly emphasizing innovative practices and results supported by investments in projects and partnerships. School leadership is committed to continuously improving educational services and promoting ongoing training for teaching and non-teaching professionals. Furthermore, they exhibit management practices aimed at creating an inclusive, safe, and challenging learning environment. This finding reinforces the idea that the pedagogical leadership of schools is an essential factor in education development. This topic has become a priority on educational policy agendas at both national and international levels (Bolívar, 2014).

In the 17 institutions classified as "Very Good," strengths predominate in all areas of analysis, with practices and results appearing generalized. In contrast, in the two institutions rated as "Good," strengths outweigh weaknesses in most areas of analysis, although some areas for improvement are identified.

⁵ In Portuguese, Lei n.º 31/2002, de 20 de dezembro.

⁶ Methodology described in: https://www.igec.mec.pt/upload/AEE3_2018/AEE_3_Metodologia_I.pdf

Analyzing the strengths category reveals that school leadership has invested in implementing inclusive policies. The IGEC found in the foundational documents of all evaluated educational institutions under analysis that a vision, mission, and objectives are aligned with the comprehensive development of students and inclusion. There is a clear commitment to fulfilling educational policies and demonstrating practical work regarding the holistic development of students and their preparation for active life, according to what is stipulated in PASEO.⁷

Regarding school leadership, Table 1's analysis shows that, in seventeen institutions, the IGEC identified a coordinated effort between management and middle leadership and a mobilization of the educational community. The actions are directed toward achieving academic goals and objectives, emphasizing improving the quality of educational services and promoting inclusive and innovative projects. However, it is noted that the institutions rated as "Good" (E13 and E20) are not mentioned in this context.

Only four reports (E04, E10, E11, E19), which include those rated as "Excellent" and "Very Good," mention continuous training practices that encompass both teaching and non-teaching staff, are promoted by the organization itself and are aligned with pedagogical needs and priorities.

In seven reports (E01, E04, E06, E13, E15, E19, and E20), the IGEC highlights the school environment as a strength. These reports indicate that a welcoming and inclusive environment has been observed, promoting quality and access to learning for all children and students, including migrants. The analysis of these reports demonstrates that fostering a safe and inclusive environment has been a priority for some school leaders, regardless of whether the rating is "Excellent," "Very Good," or "Good."

The organization of children and students through applying pedagogical criteria in forming and managing groups and classes is mentioned in reports E04, E10, and E19. Additionally, the Inspection identifies effective management of physical and human resources as a strength in eight reports (E04, E05, E06, E08, E10, E12, E18, E19), highlighting its positive impact on the school environment. In the case of report E06, the school spaces are praised for their cleanliness and maintenance of materials, emphasizing that the environment contributes to developing quality teaching and learning processes.

In most schools (E02, E03, E04, E07, E09, E11, E12, E14, E16, E17, E19, E20, E21), participation in inclusive activities and projects is highlighted, positively impacting the holistic development of children and students. Similarly, partnerships with institutions and community agents have been established to mobilize resources and improve the quality of learning. The mention of partnerships is recurrent in various reports (E01, E02, E03, E04, E07, E09, E11, E12, E14, E16, E17, E19, E20, E21) and plays a fundamental role in promoting inclusive education.

The "Areas for Improvement" are more frequent in establishments with a "Good" rating. In reports E01, E13, E18, and E20, middle leadership is recommended to improve pedagogical practices, intensify collaborative work, and manage resources more efficiently.

⁷ PASEO - Approved by Dispatch No. 6478/2017, of July 26. It can be consulted at: https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/Curriculo/Projeto_Autonomia_e_Flexibilidade/perfil_dos_alunos.pdf

According to Table 2, internal and external communication is identified as an area for improvement in six schools. The IGEC notes that relevant information and foundational documents should be available on each educational organization's website.

Regarding academic results, the Inspection advises, in four schools, the establishment of clear goals to guide teaching efforts and foster reflection among leadership and pedagogical structures. Similarly, in establishments E07, E08, E09, E15, E16, and E20, the IGEC recommends enhancing the alignment of the Educational Project with foundational documents and improving the monitoring of organizational progress. In three establishments (E01, E13, and E20), the Annual Activity Plan is suggested to include participation from parents, guardians, and non-teaching staff. It is also recommended that mechanisms for evaluating this Plan be established to focus on the quality and impact of activities on student learning and results.

In report E13, it is proposed that non-teaching staff work be recognized and a strategy to encourage their performance be implemented. Similarly, continuous teaching and non-teaching staff training based on pedagogical needs should be strengthened in establishments E13, E02, E05, E17, and E21.

Finally, in report E06, adjustments to student schedules are suggested to reinforce experimental work, and in E14, the enhancement of multiculturalism in educational practices is encouraged.

The overall analysis of the reports demonstrates a commitment from school leadership to implementing inclusive policies, regardless of the classification achieved. Institutions rated as "Excellent" and "Very Good" stand out for creating inclusive environments, providing ongoing training for professionals, and promoting projects aimed at the holistic development of students. In establishments classified as "Good," more recommendations arise, such as reinforcing collaboration among leadership (both top and intermediate), optimizing resource management, and strengthening collaborative practices.

This study confirms, in line with the arguments presented by Carvalho et al. (2023), that the implementation of inclusive educational policies is associated with school autonomy and how this autonomy is exercised by school leadership. Indeed, leadership is crucial in creating favorable conditions for inclusive and quality education. According to Sá and Sousa-Pereira (2019), directors must promote intermediate leadership that values student diversity and fosters continuous improvement in teaching and learning, contributing to the required equity and inclusive education.

Conclusion

An analysis of the reports produced by the IGEC regarding the evaluation of public non-higher education institutions in the central region of Portugal allowed us to address the research question guiding this study: "How was the implementation of inclusion policies evaluated by the IGEC in 2023/2024 by school leadership, particularly concerning the classifications obtained, the strengths, and the areas for improvement identified in the PAEE reports?" The results indicate that in schools classified as "Excellent," leadership demonstrates a sustained commitment to continuous improvement, investing in innovative practices, and fostering an inclusive school environment. According to the Framework of Reference indicators, the IGEC identified only strengths in these schools.

In schools classified as "Very Good" and "Good," despite the efforts of leadership to promote inclusion and improve the quality of educational services provided, areas that require enhancement persist, with a more significant number identified in schools rated as "Good."

This study revealed that when made aware of the principles of inclusive education, leadership plays a central role in mobilizing the organization's resources to promote inclusive practices, aiming to prepare all students for future integration into society.

Leadership needs to utilize the IGEC reports as a guide to inform improvements in inclusive practices. This will allow for correcting weaknesses and reinforcing strengths, contributing to creating and sustaining more inclusive educational environments.

As a limitation, it is noteworthy that the results presented depend exclusively on the documentary analysis of external evaluation reports, which may not capture relevant details of inclusive leadership practices in the school context. Additionally, the choice of a single geographic region (central Portugal) limits the generalization of the results to the other areas of the country.

Based on these observations, it is suggested that future research also consider the perceptions of other educational stakeholders, such as students and parents, adopting a longitudinal approach to track the evolution of inclusive practices by school leadership. This approach could provide a more comprehensive view of the challenges and progress in implementing inclusive practices. Additionally, it would be interesting to analyze the implications of the PAEE, particularly in this third evaluation cycle, on the change of inclusive practices in the evaluated educational institutions.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) under the projects of the Research Center on Didactics and Technology in the Education of Trainers (UIDB/00194/2020 – <https://doi.org/10.54499/UIDB/00194/2020>) and through the doctoral scholarship (2023.00894.BD).

References

- Afonso, A. J. (2010). Gestão, autonomia e accountability na escola pública portuguesa: breve diacronia. *RBPAAE*, 26(1), 13-30. <https://doi.org/10.21573/vol26n12010.19678>
- Ainscow, M. (2020). Promoting inclusion and equity in education: lessons from international experiences. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 6(1), 7–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2020.1729587>
- Amado, J. (2017). *Manual of Qualitative Research in Education*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.14195/978-989-26-1390-1>
- Bardin, L. (2016). *Análise de Conteúdo*. São Paulo, Brasil: Edições 70.
- Bolívar, A. (2014). La autoevaluación en la construcción de capacidades de mejora de la escuela como comunidad de aprendizaje profesional. *Revista Portuguesa de Investigação Educacional*, (14), 9–40. <https://doi.org/10.34632/investigacaoeducacional.2014.3398>
- Bolívar, A. (2019). Un currículo inclusivo en una escuela que asegure el éxito para todos. *Revista e-Curriculum*, 17(3), 827–851. <https://doi.org/10.23925/1809-3876.2019v17i3p827-851>
- Carvalho, A. E., Cosme, A., & Veiga, A. (2023). Inclusive Education Systems: The Struggle for Equity and Promoting Autonomy in Portugal. *Education Sciences*, 13(9). <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13090875>
- Decreto-Lei n.º 54/2018 da Presidência do Conselho de Ministros. Diário da República: I série, n.º 129 (2018). <https://dre.pt/dre/detalhe/decreto-lei/54-2018-115652961>
- Fialho, I., Saragoça, J., Correia, A. P., Gomes, S., & Silvestre, M. J. (2020). O Quadro de Referência da Avaliação Externa das Escolas, nos três ciclos avaliativos, no contexto das políticas educativas vigentes. In J. A. Pacheco, J. C. Morgado, & J. R. Sousa (Orgs.), *Avaliação Institucional e Inspeção: Perspetivas teórico-conceituais* (pp. 63–100). Porto: Porto Editora.
- IGEC. (2023). Terceiro ciclo de Avaliação Externa das Escolas. Quadro de referência. https://www.igec.mec.pt/upload/AEE3/AEE_QR_2023.pdf
- Lei n.º 31/2002 da Assembleia da República. Diário da República. Série I-A, n.º 294 (2002). <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/lei/31-2002-405486>
- Lei n.º 116/2019 da Assembleia da República. Diário da República: I série, n.º 176 (2019). <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/lei/116-2019-124680588>
- Lopes, J. L., & Oliveira, C. R. (2021). Inclusive education in Portugal: Teachers' professional development, working conditions, and instructional efficacy. *Education Sciences*, 11(4). <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11040169>

- Lourenço-Gil, R., Machado, J., Cabral, I., & Alves, J. M. (2020). Escola, liderança e aprendizagem - Quadro de referência para o estudo da liderança nas organizações. In I. Cabral & J. M. Alves (Orgs.), *Gestão Escolar e Melhoria das Escolas: O que nos diz a investigação* (pp. 33–98). Vila Nova de Gaia: Fundação Manuel Leão.
- Nogueira, A., Gonçalves, M., & Costa, J. A. (2019). Inspectorate's intervention in external school assessment: A study based on school principals perceptions. *Revista Portuguesa de Educação*, 32(2), 171–187. <https://doi.org/10.21814/RPE.14812>
- Oliveira, D. S. (2017). *Qualidade da educação em Portugal: O papel da avaliação externa de escolas* (Doctoral thesis, University of Aveiro, Portugal). Retrieved from <https://ria.ua.pt/handle/10773/41442>
- Sá, I., & Sousa-Pereira, F. (2019). Práticas curriculares e de avaliação da aprendizagem: contributos para a melhoria. *Linhas Críticas*, 25, 91–113. <https://doi.org/10.26512/lc.v25i0.23797>
- Sá, S. & Raposo, O. (2022). Práticas para uma escola inclusiva: o papel da liderança. *Revista EDaPECI*, 22(3), 78–92. <https://doi.org/10.29276/redapeci.2022.22.318208.78-92>
- Santos, M. N. S. (2019, novembro 28). *Inclusão: um desafio às lideranças: desenvolvimento de uma comunidade de aprendizagem*. Porto: Universidade Católica Portuguesa. <http://hdl.handle.net/10400.14/30032>
- Ventura, A. (2006). *A Avaliação e Inspeção das escolas: estudo de impacte do Programa de Avaliação Integrada* (Doctoral thesis, University of Aveiro, Portugal). Retrieved from <https://ria.ua.pt/handle/10773/1102>

Contact email: Jennifersilva@ua.pt