

# Leadership, Culture and Performance: A Case Study in Portuguese Schools

Mónica Lopo Tomaz<sup>1</sup>, Celso Silva<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Management, Hospitality and Tourism of the University of Algarve, Faro, Portugal

<sup>2\*</sup>Higher school of health of the University of Algarve, Faro, Portugal

\*Corresponding Author

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationships between leadership systems, organizational culture and school performance in school clusters in the Eastern Algarve, Portugal. Based on the assumption that schools in similar socio-economic contexts can present different dynamics and results, the research focuses on understanding how leadership, personalized in the principal, and school culture traits influence educational performance. The central hypothesis is that effective educational leadership positively influences the school's organizational culture, and that both variables are decisive in framing teaching practice and creating learning environments that boost student results. Adopting a multiple case study methodology (“constellation of cases”) in six municipalities in the Algarve, the article analyses preliminary data to contextualize the profound territorial inequalities in school enrolment, dropout and success in the region. The preliminary results of this contextualization reveal significant disparities that serve as a backdrop for the subsequent qualitative analysis. Ultimately, the work aims to identify the mechanisms that allow schools to “make a difference”, contributing with reflections to processes of change and improvement in the Portuguese education system.

**Keywords**— Educational leadership; school organizational culture; school performance; school management; educational policies; Portugal; Algarve; case study

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the remarkable progress made in recent decades, the Portuguese education system is still characterized by strong social inequalities, which are manifested in an asymmetrical distribution of the human capital acquired through schooling. The causes of school success or failure are complex and multifaceted. However, common sense social representations tend to attribute the system's failures to a wide range of phenomena outside the school organization, such as “the students' lack of will”, insecurity, lack of parental support or the incompetence of government officials. Explanations focused on the supply side of education mostly blame policies and their leaders, while explanations on the demand side focus on the socio-economic limitations of families. In this way, the school as an institution and teachers as professionals are rarely blamed.

Contrary to this perception, a wide range of academic studies point to the relevance of internal school factors, such as organizational culture, educational leadership and the stability of the teaching staff, as crucial variables for student performance. It is within this framework that this research is set, with the central aim of studying how different forms of school organization, in different socio-economic contexts, explain differences in school results. The focus is on the relationship between leadership, represented by the actions of the principal, and the organizational culture of each school grouping. The fundamental question is where, why and how the school “makes a difference” in promoting educational success.

We start from the hypothesis that educational leadership influences school organizational culture and that both variables, together, frame teaching practice and learning environments, and are therefore enhancers of school results. This study is not intended to cover the multiplicity of factors that influence education, but to focus specifically on the role of leadership and organizational cultures as elements that can counteract social

determinisms and promote integration and success.

To answer this question, the research seeks to answer the following specific questions:

- What leadership style is implemented by the Director?
- What is the impact of the principal's leadership on the (re)construction of the organizational culture?
- What is the relationship between leadership and school results?
- What is the relationship between school culture and school results?
- What measures does the school take to improve and/or maintain school results?

The study selects as its empirical field a group of school groups from six municipalities in the Eastern Algarve (Olhão, São Brás de Alportel, Tavira, Vila Real de Santo António, Castro Marim and Alcoutim), a region marked by sharp disparities between and within municipalities. Ultimately, it is hoped that the results of this research will serve as a basis for reflection that can lead to processes of change aimed at qualifying learning environments and improving the education system in Portugal.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Understanding school dynamics requires a robust theoretical framework that links the concepts of organisational culture, leadership and performance. This section explores the main theoretical formulations that underpin the research.

### **School Organisational Culture**

Analysing the daily life of school organisations requires an approach that goes beyond merely describing their formal structures. It is necessary to understand the complex interactions between the formal structure, the informal structure and the surrounding environment. School organisational culture emerges precisely at this intersection.

According to Nóvoa [1], school organisation results from the articulation of three structures: the physical (buildings, resources), the administrative (management, direction, rules) and the social (relationships between players, climate, culture).

Torres [2] expands on this view, arguing that culture is neither a mere reflection of structure nor an exclusive result of human interactions, but rather a dynamic construction process that emerges from the 'complex relationships between structure and organisational action'. From this perspective, culture assumes the status of an intermediate variable between the objective conditions imposed by the structure and the behavioural action of the actors, who have relative autonomy to create new logics and meanings.

To understand this process, it is crucial to distinguish between two theoretically differentiated cultural scenarios proposed by Torres [2]:

- **School Culture:** Refers to the set of values, norms and rituals that are traditionally institutionalised and disseminated centrally by the education system. It corresponds to a hegemonic cultural order, consolidated in "formal rules".
- **School Organisational Culture:** Emerges from endogenous variables, from the "organisational bricolage work" that combines elements of the structural order with elements resulting from the interplay of interactions and action logics of local actors. It is in this dimension that the school builds its specificity and cultural identity.

Schools, like other organisations, are subject to pressures for homogenisation, a phenomenon that DiMaggio and Powell [3] call institutional isomorphism. The authors identify three mechanisms through which this homogenisation occurs:

- Coercive Isomorphism: results from formal and informal pressures, such as government directives or demands for political legitimacy.
- Mimetic Isomorphism: Occurs in response to uncertainty, when organisations model their behaviour on others, they consider more legitimate or successful.
- Normative Isomorphism: Associated with professionalisation, it results from the sharing of norms and methods through academic training and professional networks.

Despite these pressures, the capacity of local actors to act allows for the creation of distinct organisational cultures. The literature suggests that 'strong cultures', in the sense of being cohesive and integrative, are associated with more effective and better performing schools. As MacNeil, Prater and Busch [4] point out, when an organisation has a clear understanding of its purpose, culture ensures that things run smoothly; when beliefs and values are inappropriate, culture ensures that they run poorly.

### **Leadership in the Educational Context**

Leadership is a conjunctural element that interacts directly with the school's cultural structure. In an organisation, leadership can be understood as the ability to mobilise actors and resources in pursuit of a common purpose, usually expressed in an educational project. In recent decades, with the profound social transformations of 'liquid modernity' [5], traditional leadership models have been challenged, requiring new approaches to deal with change and uncertainty.

Costa and Castanheira [6] identify three major conceptions of leadership:

1. The Mechanistic View: Leadership is seen as a process of influencing a group to achieve predefined goals. This view has evolved from a theory of traits (the "born leader", endowed with innate qualities) to an approach focused on behaviour (the "trained leader") and finally to the contingency theory, which argues that the leadership style must adapt to the situation (the "adjustable leader").
2. The Cultural Vision: This emerged in the 1980s and shifts the focus from objectives to cultural and symbolic issues. The leader is seen as a "manager of sensitivities" who shapes the organisation's culture. Concepts such as transformational leadership, which inspires and motivates employees to transcend their individual interests in favour of the organisation, in contrast to transactional leadership, which is based on an exchange of rewards for performance.
3. The Ambiguous View: Recognises the complexity, uncertainty and irrationality of organisations, seeing leadership as a symbolic rather than instrumental process.

In the school context, the leadership of the headteacher is crucial, not only in administrative management, but above all in the pedagogical dimension. International research shows that although models for recruiting and training headteachers vary, there is a consensus on the importance of their role in improving school results. Hallinger [7] proposes a model for assessing educational leadership based on three dimensions: defining the school's mission, managing the educational programme and promoting a positive learning climate.

Effective leadership, from this perspective, is directly focused on what happens in the classroom, concerned with creating the conditions for quality teaching and learning to take place.

### **Conceptual Model: From Leadership to Results**

We will identify operational indicators for each variable, i.e., in relation to Leadership: frequency of pedagogical supervision, participation in department meetings, investment in teacher training; in relation to Culture: team cohesion, sharing of practices, climate of expectations; and in relation to Results: success rates by subject, progression between cycles, reduction in dropout rates.

### **The Portuguese Context: Evolution of School Governance Models**

The leadership structure in Portuguese schools today is the result of a long historical and legislative evolution.

During the Estado Novo (1926-1974)<sup>1</sup>, school management was strongly centralised, with rectors and directors appointed by the regime to ensure compliance with directives from central power. Autonomy was limited, although some rectors managed to introduce changes to mediate internal tensions.

With the Revolution of April 25, 1974, schools experienced a period of rupture, characterized by "self-management". The old boards were replaced by democratically elected management committees, which were accountable to the School Assembly in an exercise of direct democracy and great autonomy from the central administration. This movement was later enshrined in Decree-Law no. 769-A/76<sup>2</sup>, which established the "democratic management" model, based on an elected collegiate body, the Governing Board. This model, centered on participation, was consolidated by the 1986 Basic Law of the Education System.

However, the wear and tear of the concept, the lack of interest in participation and the growing complexity of management led to a re-evaluation of the model. A reform movement began in the 1990s. Decree-Law 172/91<sup>3</sup>, although never fully implemented, proposed the figure of an executive director. Decree-Law 115-A/98<sup>4</sup> introduced "autonomy contracts", maintaining the possibility of a collegiate board (Executive Board) or a singular board (Principal).

The legal framework currently in force was established by Decree-Law no. 75/2008<sup>5</sup>, which represented a significant change by consolidating a model of singular and reinforced leadership. Its preamble is explicit in its intention to "encourage the establishment of strong leadership" and to strengthen the participation of families and the community in strategic direction. This law established the following governance structure:

- General Council: The strategic governing body, responsible for approving the school's guidelines, electing and dismissing the principal, and overseeing his or her activity. It is made up of representatives of teachers, non-teaching staff, parents, students (in secondary schools), the municipality and the local community.
- Principal: The one-person administration and management body, responsible for the pedagogical, cultural, administrative and financial areas. He is recruited from among qualified teachers, chairs the pedagogical council and has the power to appoint his deputies and coordinators.
- Pedagogical Council: The pedagogical coordination and supervision body, responsible for defining guidelines in the pedagogical-didactic and student assessment fields.
- Administrative Council: The decision-making body in administrative-financial matters, responsible for approving the budget and overseeing financial management.

This model, by concentrating executive power in the Principal, who in turn answers to a General Council, sought to create a balance between strong leadership and democratic accountability.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research adopts a mixed methodological approach, structured around a "constellation of cases", which allows for an in-depth analysis of a group of school clusters in their wider context. The reason for the choice of schools and municipalities lies in the particularity of the Algarve region, marked by strong disparities, which makes it an ideal laboratory for studying how schools respond to diverse contexts. School groups were selected in six municipalities in the eastern Algarve: Alcoutim, Castro Marim, Olhão, São Brás de Alportel, Tavira and Vila Real de Santo António. The participants included the school principals, members of the general councils and teachers, intentionally selected for their central role.

### Context of Analysis: County Monographs

To understand the socio-cultural environment, a statistical monograph was drawn up for each municipality, based

<sup>1</sup> Period of dictatorship in Portugal

<sup>2</sup> <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/769-a-1976-233694>

<sup>3</sup> <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/172-1991-612219>

<sup>4</sup> <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/115-a-1998-155636>

<sup>5</sup> <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/75-2008-249866>

on data from the Francisco Manuel dos Santos Foundation (FFMS)<sup>6</sup>:

- Municipality of Alcoutim: Characterized as one of the least populous and oldest municipalities in the country, with a very low population density (5 inhab/km<sup>2</sup>) and an ageing index of 582 elderly people for every 100 young people. The population has low levels of qualification, with only 4.2% with higher education, and a high percentage in the lower social class (47.7%).
- Castro Marim municipality: Also, a sparsely populated and ageing municipality. It has a high unemployment rate (13.3% in 2011) and a significant percentage of RSI beneficiaries. The qualifications' structure is also low, with 6.7% of the population having higher education.
- Municipality of Olhão: A more populous and denser municipality (346 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>), with a younger population. It has a more diversified economy, but also high unemployment (13.6%). The population has modest levels of qualification (8.7% with higher education).
- Municipality of São Brás de Alportel: An intermediate-sized municipality with a lower unemployment rate (9.2%). Qualification levels are among the highest in the group under study (10.6% with higher education).
- Tavira municipality: A municipality with a strong presence of foreign residents (13%). The economy is linked to tourism and services, with an unemployment rate of 13.0%. Qualification levels are similar to those of S. Brás de Alportel (9.6% with higher education).
- Vila Real de Santo António: A densely populated municipality with a relatively young population, but the highest unemployment rate in the group (17.7% in 2011). It has modest levels of qualification, with 7.5% of the population having higher education.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Techniques and Instruments**

The data collection and analysis process were planned to ensure triangulation and the validity of the results.

- Documentary Analysis: The main structuring documents of each school were collected, including Educational Projects, Self-Assessment Reports, Internal Regulations and the Principals' Intervention Projects.
- Statistical analysis: National databases such as the Atlas of Education, MISI/JNE and the Census were used to characterize school results and socio-economic context variables.
- Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were planned with school stakeholders. This type of interview allows for the collection of in-depth information, with the flexibility to explore emerging themes.
- Analysis tools: The MAXQDA software was the central tool for the qualitative content analysis, allowing systematic coding of the documents. The categories of analysis were defined a priori, based on the theoretical framework. Excel and SPSS were used to analyse the quantitative data.

The interviews will explore specific decisions made by headteachers (e.g. resource allocation, class formation criteria, support policies), the mechanisms implemented to monitor results, intervention strategies in critical subjects/years, and forms of differentiated pedagogical support.

## **RESULTS OF THE CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS**

An analysis of the statistical data for the Algarve region reveals a complex panorama of persistent inequalities.

### **Schooling of the Resident Population: Growth and Inequalities**

Over thirty years (1991-2021), all the Algarve's municipalities have seen a significant increase in average years of schooling. However, this growth has not eliminated territorial inequalities, which have remained stable. A clear duality persists between the more educated coastal municipalities and the less educated mountain municipalities, such as Alcoutim, which remained in last place. An analysis of the generation of younger adults

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<sup>6</sup> <https://ffms.pt/pt-pt>

(25-44 years old) reveals a hopeful sign: the gap between the municipalities is narrowing, with historically lagging municipalities showing new dynamism. This process of convergence, led by the new generations, is the most striking feature of recent developments.

### **School Dropout: Drastic Reduction and New Dynamics**

Portugal has achieved a drastic reduction in “early school leaving”. The Algarve's municipalities have followed this trend. The most fundamental change has been in the nature of the dropout: it is no longer associated with rural populations but is concentrated in the more urbanized and touristy municipalities, such as Lagos, Albufeira and Olhão. The attractiveness of the job market in these areas seems to act as a strong incentive for early school leaving. In this scenario, Alcoutim is a notable exception, with an early school leaving rate below the national average in 2021.

### **School Paths: The Accumulation of Delay**

Lagging in school, measured by the percentage of pupils in a cycle who are older than the reference age, is an indicator of failure and retention. The analysis reveals a cumulative effect in all the municipalities: the rates of lateness tend to increase as one progress through the cycles of education. Transitions between cycles are critical moments. The results show sharp contrasts. In basic education, the highest rates of delay are observed in Alcoutim, while the lowest are found in the neighbouring municipality of Castro Marim, a paradox considering their similarities. In the 3rd cycle, the worst result comes from the municipality of Olhão.

### **Inequalities in Schooling**

The Gini coefficient, applied to the distribution of schooling, makes it possible to measure internal inequality in each municipality. Overall, the Algarve region shows higher levels of inequality in schooling than the national average. Only the municipality of Faro is lower than the national average. At the other extreme, Alcoutim, despite improvements, has not managed to reduce its distance from the other municipalities, ranking as the municipality with the most unequal distribution of schooling in the region.

## **DISCUSSION**

The contextual analysis reveals a scenario of profound challenges for schools in the Eastern Algarve. Territorial disparities are marked and persistent, creating very unequal starting conditions. However, the variation in results between schools in similar contexts, such as the paradox between Alcoutim and Castro Marim, reinforces the central premise of this research: schools can, and do, make a difference. This difference is largely explained by the dynamic interaction between leadership and organizational culture.

The literature suggests that "strong cultures", cohesive and focused on learning, are a key factor in school effectiveness. A positive school culture has the potential to function as a "social stabilizing structure", capable of mitigating the impact of a disadvantaged social environment. As the studies by Stolp and Smith [8] show, school climate and culture can have a more direct influence on academic performance than the socio-economic status of the students themselves.

The role of the leader, and particularly the principal, is fundamental in building this culture. The Portuguese legal framework (DL 75/2008) gives the principal the authority to lead this process. An effective leader is one who is able to act as a “manager of sensitivities”, articulating the external pressures and action logics of the different internal actors to build an organizational culture of their own, a process that Sarmento [9] calls “autonomy in use”.

The contextual results presented here serve as a backdrop to the questions that the qualitative analysis will seek to answer. For example, the high rate of school delay in the 3rd cycle in Olhão raises the question: how does the leadership of the school groups in this municipality manage the curriculum, assessment and support for students? Castro Marim's relative success in basic education invites an analysis of its educational project and leadership practices. Alcoutim's dynamism in reducing school dropouts, in contrast to its persistent internal inequality, suggests the existence of effective strategies in one area, but perhaps insufficient ones in another. In short, the differences in performance observed are plausibly the result of the “organizational bricolage work” that each

school carries out, under the influence of its leadership, to respond to the challenges of its context.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article presents the theoretical, methodological and contextual framework of an investigation into the relationship between leadership, culture and school performance in six municipalities in the Eastern Algarve. The analysis of statistical data confirmed the existence of deep and persistent socio-educational inequalities in the region. The main conclusion that emerges from this analysis is that, despite the weight of these external factors, they do not absolutely determine school success or failure. The variability in results between schools in similar contexts suggests that variables internal to the school organization are decisive.

The research supports the hypothesis that the principal's leadership and the organizational culture he or she promotes are fundamental mediators of educational performance, with the potential to mitigate students' starting disadvantages and counteract social determinisms. The relevance of this study lies in its integrated approach, which combines a macro analysis with a micro analysis. By focusing on what goes on “within the walls of the school”, the work aims to provide input for reflection that seeks to identify the leadership practices and cultural traits that promote resilience and effectiveness in challenging environments.

This study has its limitations, namely the fact that, at this stage, it focuses primarily on contextual analysis. The results of the in-depth qualitative analysis, based on interviews and school documents, will be the subject of future publications and will make it possible to validate or refute the hypotheses raised here. However, the implications for educational policy and practice are already considerable. The results reinforce the need for educational policies that are sensitive to the context, that recognize the diversity of the challenges faced by schools and that invest in the development of strong and prepared leaders. The training of principals must not only be technical, but must enable them to be true culture builders, capable of mobilizing their communities around a common and ambitious educational project.

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