education sciences

MDPI

Article

School Leadership and the Professional Development of Principals in Inclusive and Innovative Schools: The Portuguese Example

Daniela Ferreira [1,*], Rui Trindade [1] and Antonio Bolívar [2]

[1] Center for Research and Intervention in Education (CIIE), Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of University of Porto, 4200-135 Porto, Portugal; trindade@fpce.up.pt
[2] Faculty of Education Sciences, University of Granada, 18011 Granada, Spain; abolivar@ugr.es
* Correspondence: danielaferreira@fpce.up.pt

Abstract

The aim of this research is to understand the events and experiences that contribute to the development of top leaders who are capable of thinking of their organization pedagogically and strategically to respond to present-day challenges. The uniqueness of the objective itself justified the choice of narrative research based on the interdependent relationship between leaders and institutions. Methodologically, the autobiographical narrative was used as the method and data collection technique. We studied the life stories of two headmasters from two school clusters in Portugal, as well as the dynamics of their leadership. The analysis of the life stories was complemented by a chronotopography, documentary analysis, focus groups with middle managers and interviews with members of the Portuguese Ministry of Education. The analysis of the data collected through the life narratives enabled a series of milestones to be identified that, due to their authors' ability to reflect, were decisive in their professional development, namely, further education; initial training; experience in management bodies and lifelong learning; the participation in the Educational Territories of Priority Intervention programme, the Pedagogical Innovation Pilot Project and school networks.

Keywords: school leadership; professional development; innovative schools; inclusive schools; autobiographical narrative; life stories

check for updates

Academic Editors: Estela Costa and Anthony G. Picciano

Received: 4 April 2025
Revised: 13 August 2025
Accepted: 22 August 2025
Published: 27 August 2025

Citation: Ferreira, D., Trindade, R., & Bolívar, A. (2025). School Leadership and the Professional Development of Principals in Inclusive and Innovative Schools: The Portuguese Example. *Education Sciences*, *15*(9), 1117. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15091117

Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

Educational policies in Portugal regarding the autonomy, administration and management of public education establishments, as well as the definition of guiding principles for the organization and management of curricula and the assessment of learning, have undergone several changes since the publication of Law 46/1986—the Basic Law of the Educational System. Following the military coup that put an end to the dictatorship in Portugal in 1974, this document established the general framework of the education system, defining the means by which the right to education for all Portuguese citizens is accomplished.

In 1989, Decree-Law no. 43 "established the legal regime for the autonomy of public schools", through the development of their own educational project involving the community. Decree-Law 115-A/1998 "approved the autonomy, administration and management system for public pre-schools and primary and secondary schools". The school administration and management framework would later be implemented through the Decree-Law 115-A/98, of May 4, which approved as autonomy instruments the Pedagogical Project, the

Internal regulations and the Annual Activity Plan (Ministério da Educação, 1998). The same legislation established the School Assembly, the Pedagogical Council and the Executive Board as governing bodies. Ten years later, a new framework was implemented through Decree-Law no. 75/2008, of April 22, restructuring the School Assembly into a General Council while maintaining the other governing bodies (Ministério da Educação, 2008b). The Executive Board was replaced by a single-person leadership, now held by a headteacher (principal). In 2012, the schools were authorized to sign autonomy contracts between the respective school, the Ministry of Education and Science and other community partners (Decree-Law 137/2012—second amendment to Decree-Law 75/2008). This regulation maintained the administration and management bodies but strengthened the competence of the general council and readjusted the electoral process for the principal. This is given greater legitimacy by reinforcing the requirements for holding the position and, on the other hand, establishes mechanisms for accountability in the exercise of leadership, management and middle management positions. The pedagogical council is now made up exclusively of teachers (Ministério da Educação e Ciência, 2012).

Aligned with leadership initiatives, a series of educational policies promoted flexible curriculum management. Decree-Laws no. 6/2001 and 74/2004 established the guiding principles for curriculum organization, school management and learning assessment at the basic and secondary levels (Ministério da Educação, 2001, 2004). In 2012, Decree-Law 139/2012 reinforced these principles by defining the knowledge and skills to be developed through subject-specific curricula. Decree-Law 55/2018 further advanced this framework, allowing schools to manage up to 25% of the curriculum matrix and introducing essential learning standards across all subjects and years (Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2018b). This Decree followed on from the Autonomy and Curricular Flexibility Project, which began in the previous school year. It was in 2017 that a large volume of legal regulations was once again published in these areas. The concept of innovation in education policy is now being introduced with Order no. 3721/2017, which "authorizes the implementation of Pedagogical Innovation Pilot Projects (PPIP) on a pedagogical trial basis for three school years", through an invitation from the Ministry of Education to seven school clusters (Gabinete do Secretário de Estado da Educação, 2017). The success of the PPIPs eventually led to the possibility for schools to manage more than 25% of the curriculum (Ordinance no. 181/2019) (Ministério da Educação, 2019).

After an interregnum in the publication of legal regulations on this subject, 2008 and 2009 were years of great importance for the Portuguese education system. Decree-Law no. 3/2008 "defined the specialized support to be provided in pre-school education and basic and secondary education in the public, private and cooperative sectors" for children and young people with special educational needs (Ministério da Educação, 2008a). In 2009, "compulsory schooling for children and young people of school age up to the 12th year of schooling and enshrines the universality of pre-school education for children from the age of 5" (Law 85/2009) was established. After ten years, once again, Decree-Law 54/2018 was published, which "establishes the legal framework for inclusive education" and extends the possibility of benefiting from learning and inclusion support measures to all children and young people (Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2018a). The 'Educational Territories of Priority Intervention' (TEIP) programme was created in 1996 with the publication of Order 147-B/ME/96 (Ministério da Educação, 1996).

The construction of a democratic school is fulfilled by its ability to serve its public. Portugal has low levels of school failure and absenteeism (1.6% in the 1st grade; 3.6 in the 2nd grade; 6.2% in the 3rd grade, 9.8% in secondary education (PORDATA, 2025)) and the progress made in 51 years of democracy is internationally recognized. As research shows, school leaders have played a fundamental role in this change. Research (Gonzales et al.,

2024; Leithwood et al., 2004; Ma et al., 2024; Marzano et al., 2001; Pina et al., 2015) has shown that not a single school improves without pedagogical leadership. If the teacher's action with their pupils is the greatest predictor of success, the action of the leadership comes immediately afterwards due to the impact that they can have on the school's curricular and pedagogical management, influencing the teachers' direct action (Acton, 2021; Day & Sammons, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2004, 2006, 2008). Day et al. (2009, p. 1) state that "the research demonstrates that principals in more effective schools are successful in improving pupil outcomes through who they are—their values, virtues dispositions, attributes and competences—the strategies they use, and the specific combination and timely implementation and management of these strategies in response to the unique contexts in which they work".

According to Leithwood et al. (2006, p. 11), "leadership is all about organizational improvement; more specifically, it is all about establishing widely agreed upon and worthwhile directions for the organization and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in those directions". The profound transformations in Portuguese schools are representative of paradigmatic changes in the way we understand the role of the teacher, the place of the students and the methods and strategies that can potentially develop learning. The teacher is now tasked with promoting learning rather than teaching, and this has shifted the discussion in terms of educational policies and pedagogical practices towards recognizing the place, prior knowledge and characteristics of students. In order to meet the diversity that characterizes schools today and the different ways of learning, teachers are now challenged to differentiate their pedagogical action in more challenging and stimulating teaching environments. It is in this sense that pedagogical leaders play a central role in the way that they think strategically about their action and build the conditions for their educational community to recognize itself in the school project and actively contribute to its development. Leadership "has very significant effects on the quality of the school organization and on pupil learning" (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 14) because they are a "catalyst for unleashing the potential capacities that already exist in the organization" (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 15). For Weinstein and Simielli (2022, p. 9), "the school principal's leadership is expressed in different ways, from the search for an educational project that inspires and motivates the educational community to providing the right support to achieve better quality teaching in the classroom, through the successful organisation of collective instances of teaching work or encouraging the general participation of the different actors in school life".

Along the same lines, the OECD identified pedagogical leadership as a key element in improving efficiency and equity in schools when it published a training program for leaders called Improving School Leadership. In the OECD's opinion, school leaders have the power to influence teachers' motivations and abilities, as well as contributing to the building of the school climate (OECD, 2011). Goleman et al. (2003) argue that one is not born but becomes a leader as one carries out one's duties, and this is why it is possible to find headteachers who are and have been built up as true pedagogical leaders; they therefore help their pupils to learn and their schools to move forward and to respond to the challenges of their communities, even when all schools have the same legal regulations (Silva, 2010).

The increase in the autonomy given to schools, a commitment of several countries (OECD, 2011), the improvement in academic results and the growing diversity and multiculturalism that characterizes schools have put pressure on the actions of leaders. The OECD (2011, p. 10) makes three proposals: (i) the need for schools to define different levels of autonomy, associated with new models of distributed leadership, new responsibilities and more training; (ii) a clear definition, by policymakers and practitioners, of the responsibility

of leadership to improve the quality of learning through teacher professional development initiatives, the definition of targets, monitoring and accountability in relation to them and strategic management of financial and human resources, as well as the creation of networks between schools; and (iii) the development of school leadership structures to improve policies and practices.

Analyzing the literature also allowed agreement to be found among various authors regarding the key dimensions of pedagogical leadership. For example, Campo and Campo (2017) present five key professional practices for educational leaders:

1. Leading learning and teaching;
2. Promoting their own professional development and that of others;
3. Leading for improvement, innovation and change;
4. Leading school management;
5. Involving and working with the community.

It is therefore possible to identify common threads between the Improving School Leadership program (OECD, 2011), the various international reference frameworks and the literature on the construction and action of leaders and pedagogical leadership.

By pedagogical leadership, we mean leadership that contributes to building more inclusive schools, where the success of all students is the project and identity of the school itself (Day & Sammons, 2013; Bolívar, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2006). It is a school in which its different stakeholders are constantly learning and seek learning through different professional development processes and initiatives (Leithwood et al., 2008); a school that seeks constant improvement by basing its decisions on data and evidence about its own context (Bolívar, 2019). Schools are people and, in schools, top leadership is key. That is why we cannot dissociate people's life stories from those of institutions. This is why it makes sense for us to reflect on the importance of a shared school culture that fosters change. As Bolívar (2019, Preface) argues, changing a school culture is challenging, but there are some practices that can be transformative. As the same author states, "building a collective vision and situating practice goals, creating collaborative cultures, high expectations of levels of achievement and providing psychological and material support to staff" are some of these dimensions. Leithwood et al. (2006) identify four leadership practices:

1. Defining a direction (vision, expectations, goals);
2. Professional development;
3. Redesigning the organization (collaborative culture);
4. Managing the teaching–learning processes.

School culture implies the active and effective participation of all those involved, and it is from this premise that Bolívar presents us with pro-professional learning communities. These are understood as schools in which there is collective decision-making, informed by scientific evidence and statistical data, but also by collective experience through constant debate on effective and ineffective practices (Bolívar, 2019), as is the case in Professional learning communities. In a professional learning community, the first and last objective is the students' learning; all action is distributed in such a way as to fulfil this desire, and when it is fulfilled, it is fulfilled as a democratic and inclusive school.

The concept of professional learning communities "suggests that the focus is not just on individual teachers' learning but on (1) professional learning; (2) within the context of a cohesive group; (3) that focuses on collective knowledge, and (4) occurs within an ethic of interpersonal caring that permeates the lives of teachers, students and school leaders" (Stoll & Louis, 2007, p. 3). It is in this sense that the construction of professional learning communities implies the professionalization of the teaching profession and accountability for the quality of students' learning and results, based on spaces and moments of collective

discussion about these and the most effective teaching–learning processes (Bolívar-Botía & Segovia, 2024).

Professional learning communities are spaces for constant learning; they are environments in which everyone learns around a common project and objective (Bolívar-Botía & Segovia, 2024) and, from there, their school culture develops and the conditions are created for it to take root. It is in this vein that the authors argue that, in order for an organization to develop sustainably over time, everyone needs to be involved and committed to improving processes, which reinforces the importance of empowered, committed and learning middle leaders. In schools with a strong school culture, there are high levels of commitment, motivation and cooperation among its members around common goals (Bolívar-Botía & Segovia, 2024). In short, schools that see themselves as professional learning communities have three main principles:

1. Ensuring that all students learn;
2. The existence of a collaborative culture where people work together to achieve common goals;
3. Improving results.

These three principles are interdependent and make schools communities of practice linked to the professional development of their entire community. These are schools that contribute to the development of social capital—relationships between teachers, and professional capital—and to the ability to work together towards common goals, both in individual relationships between teachers and between schools through the creation of networks that enable sharing (Bolívar-Botía & Segovia, 2024; Day & Sammons, 2013; Bolívar, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2006, 2008).

It is in this sense that the professional development of leaders can be seen as the decisive variable for building pedagogical leadership. Professional development means the whole set of formal and informal experiences that form part of a teacher's life trajectory (Fullan, 1991), and Brown and Borko (1992) argue that being a teacher begins long before initial training. Hargreaves (1994) states that it is the way in which each teacher—and in this sense, we understand that a headteacher is always, in the first instance, a teacher—resignifies the various events of their life in a continuous and dialectical movement (Hallinger, 2018; Nóvoa, 2022; Trindade & Cosme, 2024). For Bolívar-Botía and Segovia (2019), "the processes of forming a professional identity are based on the body of knowledge that underpins the practice, the conditions in which that practice is carried out, the professional status or social prestige of the teaching role and the cultural and social relevance of the context in which they take place" (Bolívar-Botía & Segovia, 2019, p. 69). Each teacher's ideologies about how they see school, education and the teaching–learning–evaluation process influence their professional development. Thus, as Serrazina (1999) argues, change results from an internal process and is multidimensional (Fullan, 1991). However, professional development depends on the existence of reflective processes (Schow, 1983) and this leads to reflective thinking (Dewey, 1933), which implies reflection on action and on the basis of the mission. Dewey's (1933) reflective thinking implies states of doubt and hesitation and acts of searching and questioning that allow teachers to free themselves from this doubt and find creative ways to solve it. It is this movement of reflection in action and on action (Schow, 1983) that makes this research possible and justifies it in terms of how the events in the lives of two principals have become milestones for their professional development and for building schools that follow the principles and practices of professional learning communities.

2. Materials and Methods

The main aim of this research was to understand the events and experiences that contributed to the development of top leaders who are capable of thinking pedagogically

and strategically about their organization in order to build more inclusive and innovative schools. The uniqueness of the objective itself justified the choice of narrative research, based on the interdependent relationship between leaders and institutions. Institutions "are places where stories are produced, circulated and collected, in the form of accounts, which go beyond the stories identified as such (because cultural patterns and routines are themselves stories)" (Bolívar-Botía, 2022, p. 199). Thus, methodologically, the autobiographical narrative was used as a method and as a data collection technique. Anchored in the phenomenological–interpretative paradigm, the aim of this research was to understand reality from the meanings that this same reality assumed for the subjects in their natural context (Amado, 2014; Bolívar-Botía & Segovia, 2019; Morgado, 2012; Popkewitzs, 1988).

Life stories allow for an understanding of identity, profiles, the meanings attributed to practical knowledge and the situations that mark the "processes of interrelationship, identification and personal and cultural reconstruction" of events (Bolívar-Botía & Segovia, 2019, p. 27). We studied the life stories of two principals from two school clusters in Portugal, as well as the dynamics of their organizations through the role played by their middle leaders. It is important to clarify that the two leaders and their institutions were selected both because of their own school's track record in terms of development and academic results and because of their pre-existing relationship with the principal investigator. The existence of a previous relationship of trust is a prerequisite for the success of the research itself. Bolívar-Botía (2022, p. 183) argues that the methodological option of life stories requires a degree of reciprocal relationship between interviewer and interviewee, since the "quality and depth of the account obtained will depend on the degree of human significance (empathy) achieved". The interviews with the leaders were structured in three cycles of successive semi-structured interviews, as proposed by Bolívar-Botía (2022):

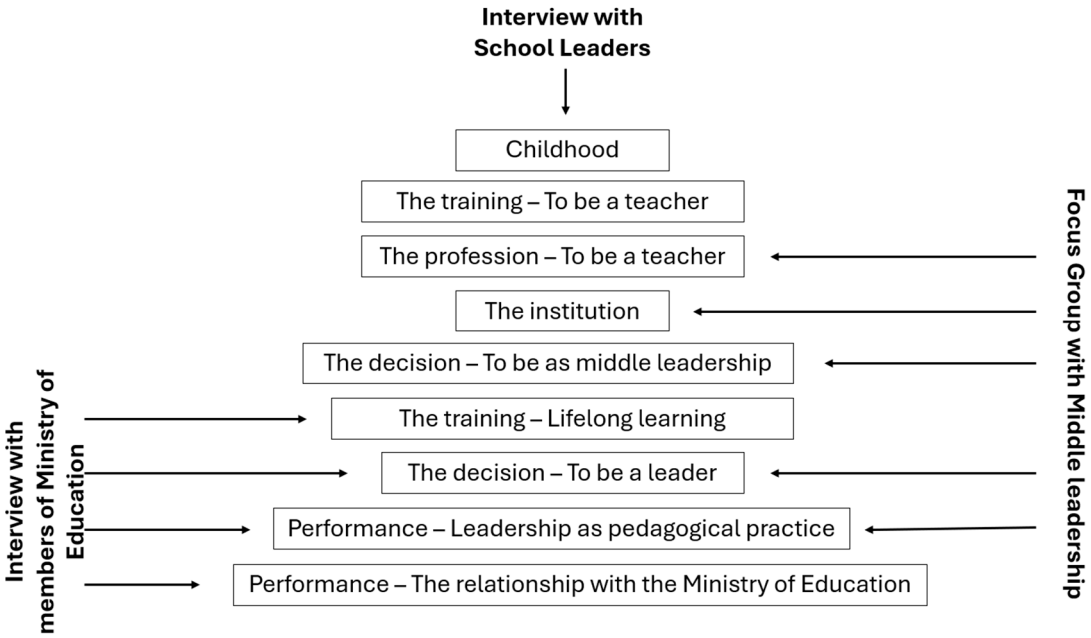
i. First interview: chronological exploration of the career, transcribed and subjected to analysis, present in the attached script through the parts of childhood; training—in teaching, the profession, the institution; the decision—to be a middle leader; training—in school administration; the decision—to be a principal; the performance—leadership as pedagogical practice and the relationship with guardianship;
ii. Second interview: exploration of blank questions or in-depth study of some categories not explored in the first interview, as well as generalized reflection on the overall experience of the career, in this case, the decision—to become a headteacher; the action—leadership as pedagogical practice and the relationship with the board. The interview was then transcribed and analyzed;
iii. Third interview: discussion of the interviews and reflection on the analysis carried out.

The analysis of these interviews was complemented by a chronotopography, i.e., "the times and spaces that diachronically shape professional identity" (Bolívar-Botía, 2022, p. 194). This analysis allowed for cross-referencing of professional development with the mobility that characterizes teaching professionalism, as well as the educational policies in force at any given time, which cause tensions in the way that each professional thinks about their actions. In this way, the three characteristics proposed by Desmarais (2010) were met: the narrative, the temporal analysis of the narrative and the search for meaning on the part of the narrator and other actors involved (Bolívar-Botía & Segovia, 2019). The confidentiality of the data in the life stories was guaranteed, but due to the nature of the research, the two participants agreed to be identified.

The interviews with the pedagogical leaders were complemented by document analysis of the reference documents of the school clusters and focus group interviews with the middle leaders where data anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. This methodological option is based on the constructivist view of organizational reality (Bolívar-Botía & Segovia, 2019; Weick, 1995) in which organizations are the result of the ways and experi-

ences of the individuals who work in them. I this multi-voiced account, constructed through the diverse meanings of different actors, it is possible to build the history of the institution (Bolívar-Botía, 2022), contributing to the construction of the "biographical-institutional history" of the school institution. Thus, we start from the understanding that the reports of the middle leaders, i.e., the group of people appointed by the headteacher, who intervene and influence the dynamics and daily life of the school, allow for triangulation with the reports of the leader himself—the headteacher. The choice to collect data from middle leaders is linked to an understanding of the meaning of successful leadership—"a successful leader, along with achieving good results in their school, has managed to create human relationships of trust between its members, which enables collective responsibility for improvement" (Bolívar-Botía & Segovia, 2019, p. 68). The hope is thus to understand the ways in which the relationship between life history and the professional profile and the history of the institution and organizational culture intersect and influence each other (Bolívar-Botía & Segovia, 2019).

Data analysis and processing were based on content analysis (Vala, 1999) and the categorization process was guided by a set of previous categories, presented in Scheme 1, and complemented, given the nature of biographical research, by emerging categories (Bolívar-Botía & Segovia, 2019; Esteves, 2006).



Scheme 1. List of categories of data collection techniques.

In line with international reference frameworks and the principles underlying the concept of a professional learning community, this methodological option makes it possible to build a common vision of the object under study—building leaders who are committed to building more inclusive, challenging and innovative schools. In short, because this issue was the subject of reflection and analysis when defining the methodological design, we believe that the autobiographical narrative is used in this research as a method and as a data collection technique. We base our position on the distinction made between life story and life history (Bolívar-Botía & Segovia, 2019). While the former corresponds to the autobiographical account or narrative of the unique character and positioning of the person interviewed from an individual perspective, present in this research in the interviews with the principals, the latter contextualizes and politicizes this account in light of the analysis proposed and described above, as well as the triangulation with other data collection

techniques—documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews and focused discussion groups (Goodson et al., 2017). These are the assumptions that give narrative research rigor, validity and reliability. On the other hand, Bolívar-Botía and Segovia (2019) also argue that this type of research, by focusing on exemplary and unique cases, can also be assumed to be a case study, if the life story is understood as the case. In this research, we understand that the case is the construction of more inclusive, innovative and challenging pedagogical leaderships, for which life narratives and the organizational dynamics of educational establishments are powerful tools for responding to the initial objective. The aim is to understand the events and experiences that contribute to the development of top leaders who are capable of thinking pedagogically and strategically about their organization in order to respond to the current challenges of schools.

3. Results and Discussion

We begin by presenting the two infographics in the form of chronotopographies referring to the professional life journeys of these two principals, which allow us to identify the events and experiences that contributed to the construction of pedagogical and strategic leadership.

We begin by presenting the chronotopography of principal Mário Rocha of the School Cluster of Cristelo (Figure 1). Having arrived at the school in 1996, he began to take on middle leadership roles from an early age, namely as class principal, coordinator of the Environment Club and coordinator of the subject group. Two years later, he was invited to join the school's Executive Board as vice president, and it was at this time that he began his master's degree in teaching. After completing it, he was invited to carry out his PhD in 2001. As vice president until 2007, he broke with the current board and took on the role of top leader in 2007/2008, which he has held to this day, and after two years he joined the TEIP programme. In 2015/2016, he was invited by the Ministry of Education to join the PPIP and in 2023/2024 the PPIP2.

The chronotopography of principal Cesário Silva of the School Cluster of Marinha Grande Poente (Figure 2) shows that he also became a teacher and principal at the same institution, since his arrival, dating back to 1988. Like the other participant in this study, he also took on middle leadership roles early on, namely as headteacher. Two years after arriving at the school, he took on management roles and remained there for two terms of two years each. In 1997, he took on a role in the Active Life Insertion Unit, closely linked to vocational courses, and in 2004 he began a master's in education followed by a PhD, as did the previous principal. He resumed his role as a top leader in 2007/2008 and was invited by the Ministry of Education to join the TEIP programme in 2012. In 2015/2016, he was invited by the Ministry of Education to take part in the PPIP and, in 2023/2024, the PPIP2. Due to circumstances in his life, he served as president of provisional administrative committees—with one-year terms—and as principal of the same school cluster.

By cross-referencing his experiences with the educational policies in force during his career, it can be seen that, during his tenure as principal, he accompanied flexible curriculum management policies, the start of external evaluation processes for schools—a movement that recognized the importance of monitoring action in order to improve processes—changes to the special education framework in Portugal and, currently, the most recent changes in terms of inclusive education and innovation, where his school is a pioneer.

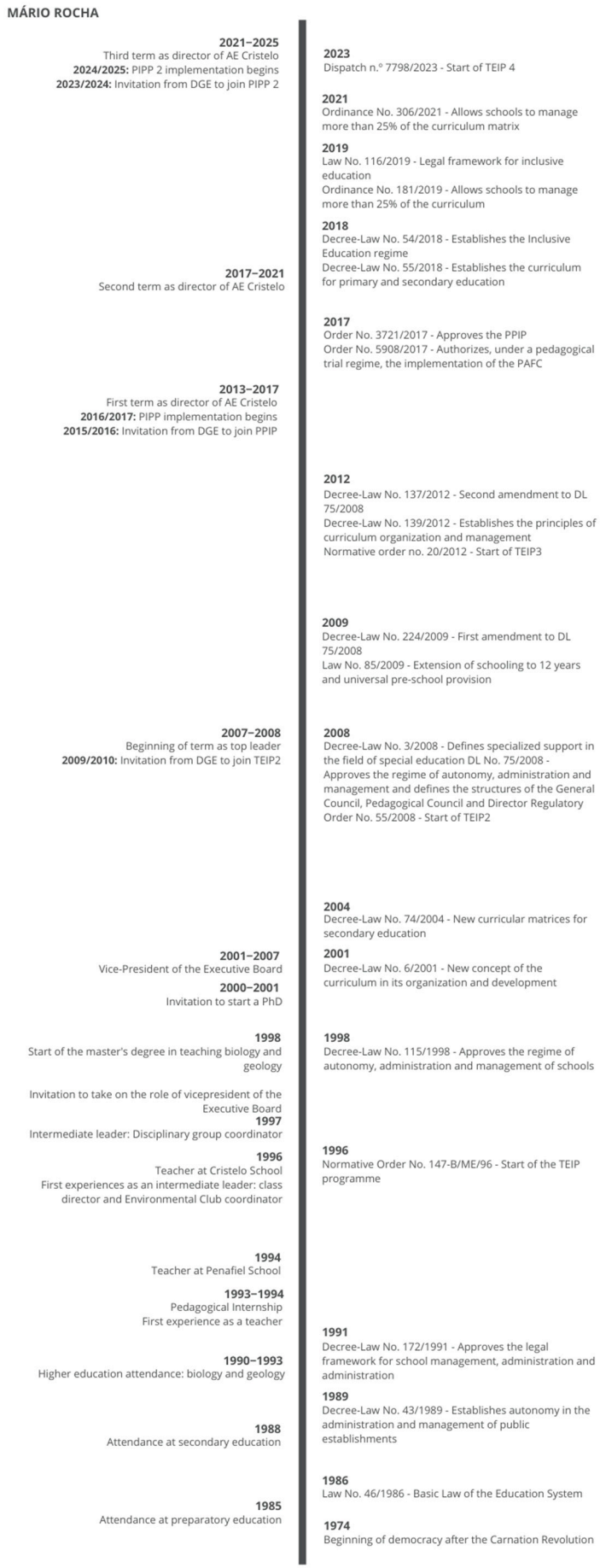


Figure 1. Chronotopography of principal Mário Rocha.

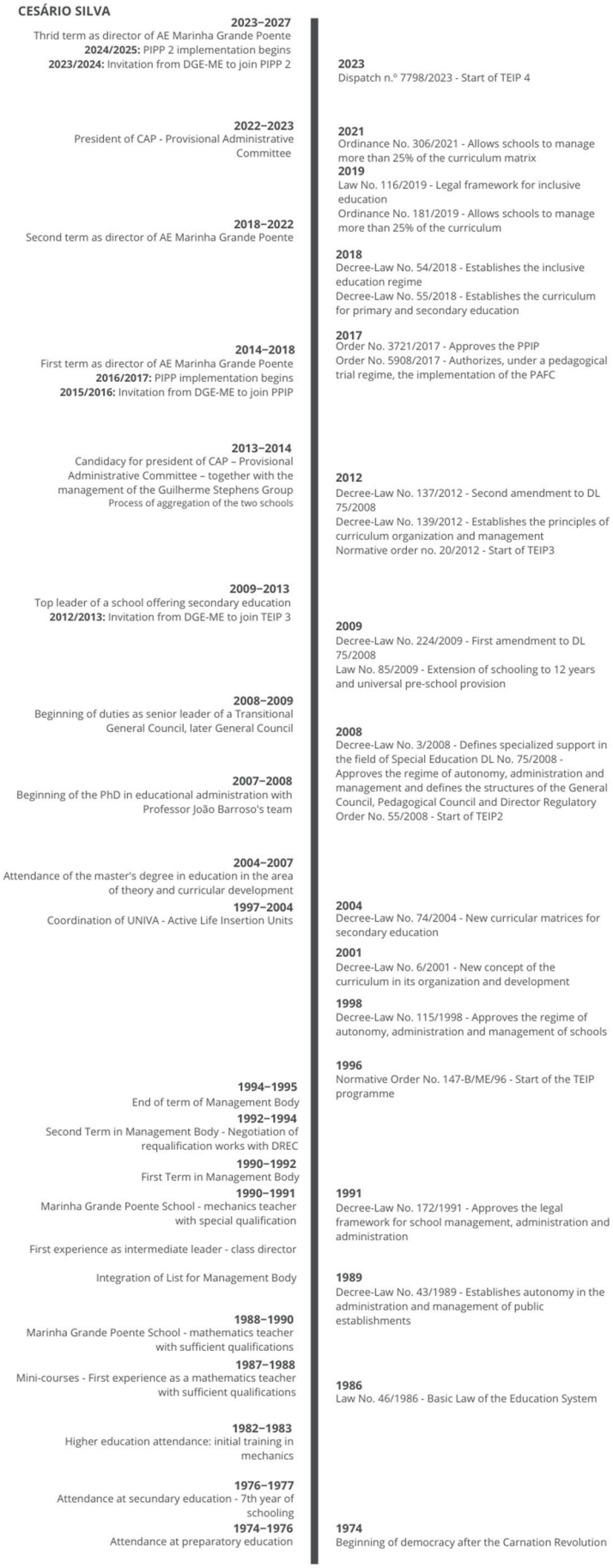


Figure 2. Chronotopography of principal Cesário Silva.

Based on a constructivist view of organizational reality (Bolívar-Botía & Segovia, 2019; Weick, 1995), we can see how these two life stories are dialogical with the stories of the institutions themselves, as one of the principals portrays.

> It means my whole professional life, which also includes part of my personal life. My friends were built here too—my life was lived here with all these people, non-teaching staff, with some teachers who I've always known here too. They're good friends. This school means life; it means life—I can tell you that. (Mário Rocha)

When one has been working in a school for decades, the boundaries become blurred and it becomes difficult to understand the extent to which one is able to influence the other. In the dynamics of relationships and the dynamism of schools, points of convergence emerge that contribute to the creation of very specific school cultures. If, on the one hand, permanence in office directs the institution's history in a certain direction, it is this permanence that can also contribute to the rooting of processes and the creation of each school's culture.

The choice of these two principals and, inherently, these two schools was based on the knowledge of their work, their academic results and the fact that they have been part of innovation pilot projects on several occasions, at the request of the Portuguese Ministry of Education. Their teachers' pedagogical practices and leadership practices have become benchmarks in Portugal, and they have been invited to host national and international teachers, as well as members of other international ministries of education, to share their practices at academic events, seminars organized by the Ministry of Education or at practice-sharing events held by other schools. These two schools are located in rural areas of Portugal and are part of the TEIP programme—Educational Territories of Priority Intervention. One of the schools is located in the north of Portugal and the other in the center, and both offer pre-school to secondary education.

The analysis of the two educational projects reveals the existence of continuity projects where the strategic and pedagogical vision marks their practices, as well as the concern for inclusion, innovation and collaboration present in both the values and the founding principles of their action. In their action plans, internal coherence can be found, as well as a definition of strategic axes and actions/objectives in line with the literature presented above, namely the importance of teaching–learning processes and the existence of a culture of collaboration between the different members of each of the educational communities.

The Educational Project of the Cristelo school refers to the importance of the school's action in

> reducing school dropout and strengthening institutional autonomy, promoting flexible, innovative interventions tailored to the specific needs of students and their families. In addition, it promotes the sustainable development of the local community, with strategies that respond to vulnerability factors, such as the high percentage of beneficiaries of school social action, students whose mothers have less than 12th grade education and migrant students. (Educational Project, p. 6)

Throughout the document, the school's commitment to the community is very evident, which is indicative of its integration and concern for the area in which it operates. The values presented by the school are educational excellence; inclusion and equity; participation and collaboration; and innovation and continuous improvement, which contribute to the strategic vision presented: "we want to be a school that promotes excellence and optimism, based on cohesion, responsibility, critical thinking, innovation and openness to the world. We aim to train informed and supportive citizens, with practical inclusion, where empathy and social responsibility permeate the school environment" (Educational Project, p. 6). In a coherent relationship, the mission statement seeks to "form ethical, autonomous and

aware citizens, making the school a cultural space, open to the community. To promote democratic participation, support for parents and diverse partnerships, offering meaningful learning opportunities. With a focus on educational success and equity, we aim to reduce inequalities and consolidate a culture of continuous improvement, preparing students for an inclusive and fair society" (Educational Project, pp. 6–7). Strategic objectives include "(1) improving teaching and student performance; (2) combating school and social dropout and exclusion; and (3) strengthening and energizing school management in partnership with the community" (Educational Project, p. 7).

An analysis of the Educational Project of SC Marinha Grande Poente shows, right from its introduction, that the action at this school is one of continuity and its concern is with "improving pedagogical innovation practices, based on providing a quality educational service, assuming as a public service mission the training of responsible, autonomous and critical citizens, with solidarity and committed to the values of a democratic society" (Educational Project, p. 2). There is a strong focus on pedagogical practices and a clear concern for pedagogical differentiation, assessment, self-regulation, feedback and joint reflection in a school that is concerned with the participation of students, their families, teaching staff, non-teaching staff and the wider community. This is carried out in order to respond to the challenges of society "from an integrative perspective, respecting individuality, in a school of all and for all, democratic, inclusive and socially fairer" (Educational Project, p. 2). The values presented by the school are humanism, responsibility, citizenship and democratic participation, commitment and efficiency, which underpin a framework for action based on seven principles: the principle of inclusion; interculturality; flexibility and innovation; community integration; self-regulation of learning; collaborative work; and joint reflection on results (Educational Project). Its strategic action plan is structured around four axes: "Quality of Educational Service and Learning"; "Culture of the Grouping and Pedagogical Leadership"; "Organization, Management and Training"; and "Partnerships and Relations with the Community".

If the concept of professional learning communities implies the existence of professional development practices in a group context and collaboration within an ethic of care that permeates the lives of teachers, students and management (Stoll & Louis, 2007), we find this type of practice in both institutions. In the voices of the principals and their intermediate leaders, we find a focus on training processes, promoted internally or by the training centers; participation in projects or the establishment of partnerships with higher education institutions; peer pedagogical supervision; and the internal promotion of moments for the discussion and analysis of academic practices and results.

> We also have to make a big commitment to training and the possibility we have of having our own LeiriMar training centre (. . .) participate in partnerships and projects with other institutions and, above all, with higher education institutions. (. . .) We've already had the project of intervision of classes, (. . .) pedagogical pairs are the best intervision strategies that we're also having, because people are in the same space, they're sharing methodologies, and they're sharing strategies—how can we do this; how can we do that—and they discuss it and then there's already one who can do it. There's a lot of the process; it's a process that's discussed a lot among themselves and that's why I think it's very important. (. . .) So I did a DCA last week. And I shared our vision of some of our documents, reflecting on the issues of the descriptors and I felt that people were thinking when I told them something as simple as this: making the performance appraisal report for those who are in this cluster requires, first of all, understanding which descriptors are in force in the cluster (. . .) And arriving at the end of two and a half hours

> and discussing these aspects and hearing people at the end say I never had an integrated notion of the appraisal process. (Cesário Silva)

> We organize a lot of workshops, a lot of moments of sharing that mainly go towards what we think are the main weaknesses that may still exist in the cluster, in some way to try to address these weaknesses (. . .) in some department meetings, when the information isn't that much, we promote moments for the person to feel like looking for some more knowledge. (FG SC Cristelo)

> Training that starts by being internal training, in the sense of also encouraging internal training that is shared and collaborative work, such as workshops that we do regularly. We can even say that we have panels and workshops here at least three times throughout the year in which we promote internal training, but then we also have discussions every month to take stock of what is being done and also to listen to the students, to listen to the educational community. And this is one of the most significant strategies, in terms of promoting active learning methods and also encouraging pedagogical practices. (Mário Rocha)

> They attend training which is then an asset to the work they do in the workshop context. On the other hand, we hold monthly meetings and create situations for sharing, even of tools. (FG SC Marinha Grande Poente)

Having presented the data on their life histories and the histories of the institutions, their journeys and the data on their schools, we will now present the experiences that, in the words of the two participants, were milestones in their professional development. These are further education; initial training; experience in management bodies and lifelong learning; the TEIP, the PPIP and the school networks.

3.1. Further Education

The value placed on school and education in the family is a factor mentioned in the speeches of both principals. In their childhood description, they both say that they were the first in their family to pursue their studies and that expectations, pressure and financial efforts were motivating factors. However, one of the principals, who was already a student at a different historical and political time, mentions his love for learning and studying.

> I think so. I think there's a family characteristic, which I think is also relevant in this sense. I'm the first to have a university degree, the third son and the first to have a university degree. And nothing could have been expected—I have this notion—if April 25th hadn't happened. Because what would you expect from the son of a truck driver and a maid? You wouldn't expect anything other than elementary or compulsory schooling and then going out into the world of work. But no, fortunately I got through this transition cycle, even though I always felt that my family valued education and school as important, and even my sisters, who were older, always felt that I valued this aspect a lot and would help and support me so that I would actually invest in my schooling. So that's what happened. (Cesário Silva)

> So, as a student, I was always, from a very young age, very fond of studying, perhaps because I was also in a family where I was the first one to study, or to study further, so as this was a lot. This responsibility was very much placed on my shoulders, by my parents; I also felt a certain obligation to study—I don't know—but I liked it. (Mário Rocha)

Their experiences as pupils during childhood and at school demonstrate what Brown and Borko (1992) argue when they say that professional development begins before initial training.

3.2. Initial Training

Entering higher education was also the moment when both had their first experiences of the school world. One of the principals ended up not completing a degree in mechanical engineering and this was an opportunity to apply for a position as a math teacher with sufficient qualifications. The other had a great love for studying and wanted to be a researcher, but it was in the third year of his degree that he realized he wanted to be a teacher and became aware of how unprepared he felt for the job. It was the professional internship that was a defining moment in his career and professional development, as it was a time when being a teacher was accompanied by reflection on practice, pedagogical practices and relationships with students and their learning (Dewey, 1933; Nóvoa, 2022; Schow, 1983; Trindade & Cosme, 2024).

> It never crossed my mind, it wasn't until the third year, when I was already in science, that I switched to education and decided to become a teacher. (. . .) We had a very thorough scientific preparation, no doubt about it, but we had no preparation for teaching, or for training people, absolutely nothing. (. . .) I didn't feel that any of it had much application in my day-to-day life. And, in fact, my great, great training was when I did my teaching internship. Then, yes, I felt that I began to learn, because the teaching internship was also accompanied by a monograph, which we had to do, and which obliged us, once again, to revisit all the didactics and all the educational psychology. And then, yes, I felt that I deepened my knowledge a lot more. I started to take a lot more interest in this, and I felt that the internship, and I still think so today, the pedagogical internship was fundamental to my training as a teacher, as initial training. (Mário Rocha)

> Now, I remember her perfectly because she was wonderful. She taught us fantastic things: how to approach a class, techniques for dealing with students' difficulties. She was a wonderful teacher, a wonderful advisor, and a lifelong friend. She was much older, but she taught us a lot. I think that's when you realize how important experience, pedagogical or didactic knowledge is in training people, and she was a wonderful human being too, and she made us feel that this teaching profession could be a wonderful profession if we also embraced it with passion. And she transmitted that passion to me. I really enjoyed it. I was lucky enough to have this advisor who opened my eyes. (Mário Rocha)

> Then, after completing my master's degree, perhaps in 2007, I was also a little challenged to continue with my doctorate and, therefore, I took a short break here, perhaps for a year, and started a doctorate in school organization and management in Lisbon, with a fantastic team. I've always had fantastic teams of teachers, who I think end up being more like mentors than teachers and, above all, who share knowledge, life experiences and very positive things. (Cesário Silva)

The analysis of the data shows very clearly the importance of a solid academic education. Both principals were invited to study for a doctorate after completing their master's degrees. These two initial training experiences are, according to the principals, significant moments of professional development for the same reason: the sharing of practices, professional knowledge and life experiences (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1997; Schow, 1983; Trindade & Cosme, 2024), as we can see in both speeches.

> And then I went to work in this area of school organization and administration with Professor João Barroso and his team, as well as with Professor João Barroso, Professor Natércio Afonso, Professor Luís Miguel Carvalho, and also with Professor Madalena, I think it was the four of us, it was a team of four with whom we worked and we had our training project for our first year of the doctorate. (. . .) At the time, I feel that this whole process of what was a normative edifice on which our education system was based had a whole process of continuities and discontinuities, it's true. But it made us immerse ourselves a lot in this dimension and, above all, in the evolution of the margins of autonomy, of the issues that were spaces that schools could appropriate in order to be able to build what was their identity, their culture and also have the possibility of working in another way that wasn't strictly very homogeneous, with room for openness. And also realizing that this whole group of trainers led us to a lot of discussion and very deep reflection and, above all, to learning how to do something that was very much a documentary analysis of some important processes, a content analysis of some regulations and this polysemy that some words contain and being able to understand the context of their applicability; sometimes being able to understand what the legislator's intention is when he tries to make certain information explicit, how that preamble to a regulation is constructed and so on. So, in that respect, it was very rich and, above all, it was very challenging because it also allowed us to be in contact with others, with the reality and with educational systems in other European countries where we were also sharing some experiences and, above all, realizing this diversity between many systems, from more centralized systems like ours, to very decentralized systems, to systems like the Spanish system, which is very regional and then municipal, and all these processes were very important from that point of view. (Cesário Silva)

3.3. Experience on Management Bodies and Lifelong Learning

As can be seen in the infographics presented above, these two principals were invited to join management bodies two years after arriving at the schools. Once again, the analysis of the data shows that both went through processes of breaking away, years later, from the directorates that they were part of and submitted individual applications that were chosen by their peers.

> Well, the truth is that it never crossed my mind, but the point is that I was, I was vice president for six years and after six years, there ended up being a break with the president at the time (. . .) and the truth is that after various contingencies, I ended up putting forward a team for the Executive Board. We went ahead, we thought we were going to win and we did; in 2007, we won the governing body. That same year that we were elected, the very next year the possibility arose of doing a postgraduate course in school administration at the University of Coimbra and so it was, the three of us went to do the school administration course at the University of Coimbra. Later, with the publication of Decree-Law 75/2008, there were applications for the position of principal and I applied for the position of principal and stayed on. (Mário Rocha)

While one of the principals took up his post and enrolled in a postgraduate course in school administration, the other was studying for a doctorate. In their speeches, the importance of lifelong learning is commonplace, as is the recognition of how these moments allowed them to think about the education system in general and their school in particular (Serrazina, 1999). In the speech that we are highlighting here, it is interesting to note that

this headteacher goes on to postgraduate studies accompanied by members of his own team, and that there is a joint training process (Bolívar-Botía & Segovia, 2019; Bolívar, 2019).

> I'm a big believer that we should always learn in certain positions. The more we learn, the more we can deepen our knowledge, and the better we are in the job we're going to do. I felt that there were a lot of people there that I got to know and one of them ended up being our first external expert later on at TEIP; she was our postgraduate teacher and ended up becoming a personal friend of all of us and we still have her as such today. But the postgraduate course was very important for me to be able to do the job in the way we have been doing it ever since. Not just me, but also the rest of the people who did their postgraduate studies with me. (Mário Rocha)

3.4. The Educational Territories of Priority Intervention (TEIP) Programme

One of the milestones most often mentioned and best described by both principals is their entry into the TEIP programme. With one entering in 2008 and the other in 2012, these two schools joined the program in different generations but had in common the fact that there was a great stigma about TEIP schools. It is important to clarify that these schools are selected for their low academic results and high levels of absenteeism and conflicts, as well as the fact that they are located in weaker socio-economic settings. Data analysis shows this reality, but it also reveals a re-signification of this entry (Hallinger, 2018). Both principals transformed the label and stigma into projects of success and inclusion that would allow them to meet the needs of their students in a different way. The entry into the TEIP programme is very illustrative of what Dewey (1933) refers to when he explains the states of reflective thought: the state of doubt and hesitation and the act of searching and questioning.

> Back in 2012, as a secondary school, we had joined the TEIP programme, Territórios Educativos de Intervenção Prioritária (Educational Territories of Priority Intervention), and when I was called to Coimbra to be asked if we would be available to join this project, the first thing that popped into my head was to think like this: TEIP at the time still had a less positive connotation and, above all, we were a school where there was and there still is a great deal of socio-economic and socio-cultural heterogeneity. But it could be an asset and, above all, it had to get here and I couldn't say that we were an Educational Territory of Priority Intervention in that way. Yes, that's right, it was already at that last stage when we joined, and we had to meet with the school and the teachers and the parents' association and all those structures, and also with the staff to pass on this information and raise awareness. We had to dismantle this and when I came here from Coimbra, a thought went through my head, which was to say we're not going to be a TEIP, we're going to be a TEIPS and, so that's what I said to the school: "Look, we've been invited to join the Educational Territories of Priority Intervention and we're going to accept joining the Educational Territories of Inclusion and Promotion of Success, TEIPS", so that's what we're going to be, an Educational Territory of Inclusion and Promotion of Success. And that way we'll have a few more resources to be able to respond to our students' needs, we're going to have the chance to join a team here in the student and family support office, because we'd already come from projects under the Escolhas programme, which worked a lot with disadvantaged young people and families with economic and social needs, so there was already a bit of a leverage of situations and this transition was very smooth. We never felt any stigma, people never associated us with this issue and so, in 2012, we once again took on another challenge and, having just started this

> process, we were discussing the reorganization of school clusters in Portugal at the time. (Cesário Silva)

> We were in 2008, here in 2008, exactly, I think, around May 2008, and we were invited to be included, invited in quotes, because in fact what happened was that we were forced to be included in the TEIP 2 programme. At the time, as you can imagine, TEIP still had a very strong stigma, in the sense that those who went to TEIP, or the schools that were included in TEIP, would eventually be schools with various problems, in various dimensions. At the time, when the DGE-ME called me, I was very surprised and asked why, why it had to be, and what they said was, it has to be, it has to be. You have to be included, given your socio-economic background and also your failure rates, especially in the third cycle. (Mário Rocha)

> Firstly, it's funny that we took the acronym TEIP, the Território Educativo de Intervenção Prioritária (Educational Territories of Priority Intervention), and reworked the vision we've had for this cluster since the beginning, which has to do with Work (=Trabalho), Ingenuity (=Engenuidade), Inclusion (=Inclusão), and Progress (=Progresso). We took the letters of TEIP and turned them into this. (Mário Rocha)

As per the speeches of the two principals, the initial concept of TEIP—Territórios Educativos de Intervenção Prioritária (Educational Territories of Priority Intervention), has been reframed to include concepts such as inclusion, work and success, in line with the objectives of the TEIP programme but more ambitious from the point of view of the mission of their schools. The re-signification of the TEIP concept, in an attempt to bring the community together in a common school project, can be, as Bolívar (2019) argues, a practice that fosters change in the construction of school culture. After the resignification, TEIP is an opportunity for these teams to think about their school and start building their own culture and identity (Bolivar, 2014; Bolívar, 2019; Hallinger, 2018).

> And all of this completely revolutionized and also contributed enormously to our TEIP educational project gaining consistency. So, that first year I had as president of the Executive Board, first, it was more or less two years until I was elected principal, it was already at the end of 2008. But 2007–2008 and then 2008–2009 was very important, both because of the training I had personally and because of the contact I had with the TEIP programme, as it is now called, which empowered me a lot in terms of what should be done at the level of an institution, and above all at the level of an institution that was concerned about improving, but which also didn't know very well how to tackle a problem. And this involvement of both the top leadership and the entire team was crucial. I didn't just do the TEIP training, it was my team at the time from the Executive Council, and I took some other members, department coordinators, to do this training with DEGEstE and DGE, and this gave us the extremely important know-how to get off to a good start in what was supposed to be the beginning of the TEIP educational project. So I think that if you were to ask me what the strong points were, or if you want to say the major strengths that gave me a kick-start as president of the Executive Council, I think it was undoubtedly the TEIP programme, the opportunity we had to join TEIP. So much so that today, after all these years, I still feel this TEIP identity, I still feel it a lot and I think we've had pilot projects—we're still having them; we've had many other projects—but our identity as a TEIP was what gave us the most from the point of view of improving as an institution. (Mário Rocha)

> What sets TEIP apart? (. . .) I remember that, in line with TEIP, right from 2010, we built a tool here to monitor everything we did and we built all the indicators there; we built all the targets there; it's there that our class plan is made up; it's there that our lesson plan is operationalized; it's there that all this is crossed with the educational project. And building this internal tool meant that we had to travel all over the country—we even went to the University of the Algarve to present the tool, but then we were also asked, through the DGE, to do an intervention in some countries at the European level. And so it was, and this brought us this particularity and opportunity to have been at various times with other experiences and this obviously enriched everything we were doing and what we are today. And the truth is that this cannot be overlooked; our learning is a whole, isn't it? So these experiences with TEIP, that TEIP brought us other opportunities, even made us get to know other realities, then the pilot project for pedagogical innovation that made us get to know a network of people who even had the same interests as us and who sometimes even had the same difficulties that we had, and at the same time it also gave us the chance to share several things and experiences that made us much better. (Mário Rocha)

Once again, it is important to point out that joining the TEIP programme comes two years after the start of their terms as principals, which is why, as they say, it turned out to be a very significant milestone in terms of learning and rethinking. According to the school leaders, the TEIP programme provided structure by building on accumulated experience and highlighting the importance of connecting schools facing similar challenges within a shared network. The network of schools, the monitoring by the Ministry of Education and the accountability in terms of funding, which required a process of systematic monitoring of its results, actions and defined goals, all contributed to the growth of the school, which had a very strong impact on the professional development of the principals.

These schools and principals now have very close monitoring from the Ministry of Education: they have to account for their action plans and they have to define paths and targets. The need to have a strategic vision and an action plan to achieve it, leading to the creation of very unique structures and tools within these schools.

3.5. The Pedagogical Innovation Pilot Project (PPIP)

Recently, under the changes in Portugal's education policies, a group of seven schools was invited by the Ministry of Education to take part in the PPIP. The PPIP allowed these schools to manage the curriculum without limits and to think of innovative pedagogical practices that would improve the quality of learning and, as a consequence, improve academic success rates, as happened with the entry into TEIP (see Dewey, 1933). The creation of this micro-network of schools, with monthly meetings, accompanied by various professionals from the Ministry of Education's network and several academics, challenged schools to think "outside the box" through moments of sharing (see Serrazina, 1999).

> The innovation projects, the innovation plans and the PPIPs, yes, they were also very important because they were also built in an immersive way, in other words, very much in cooperation and collaboration and with processes of permanent questioning and reflection, when sometimes people would say to us: So, now that we've made all this effort and done all this work, if perhaps they don't approve our plan, what was the point? I said, it was useful for us to understand where we were, the difficulties we had and that, perhaps, the answers we found weren't the best; we're going to have to go back to the drawing board to discuss and reflect again. So this process is very much one of co-construction. (Cesário Silva)

> In 2016, as I've already said, we entered that pedagogical innovation pilot project, PPIP, now known as PPIP1, and it was another moment, which I would say was the third impactful moment, because in addition to all the experience I had previously gained from those two impactful moments, I felt that we were now being challenged to do something different. We knew perfectly well all the steps we had to take to build teaching teams, to develop processes of monitoring and pedagogical supervision, but we also had to focus a lot on what would be pure and unadulterated autonomy, pedagogical autonomy, which could even include curricular autonomy. And this was a huge challenge, to have this very broad autonomy, in which we could, as was said at the time, literally tinker with everything, the subjects, the way the subjects were organized in the curricula, the way the curricula were organized among themselves, how these subjects were interlinked, aggregated, etc. But we could even tinker with the organization of school years, the way periods were organized, the ways teachers worked with each other—we could even tinker with the way classrooms were organized. All of this gave us a completely different mentality, a completely different view of what school environments were and how we organized ourselves within a school. That third impactful moment undoubtedly brought me and my entire team a challenge, I would say, more of a challenge, so that we could see this particular autonomy and flexibility as something that was a great opportunity for us to make a difference, and not just something that was handed down from on high, as if the tutelage ordered it and we had to comply. It completely changed the way we look at education, at schools, and brought us a lot of daring, a lot of thinking outside the box, and above all it brought us this opportunity to add something to education, which until then I can't say we hadn't added, because the TEIP programme had already brought us a lot, but as I said earlier, a lot in the area of monitoring and supervision, and little in the area of autonomy and curricular flexibility, in terms of pedagogical methodologies. That's what the PPIP has brought. (Mário Rocha)

This pedagogical experience had an extremely positive impact on the professional development of these principals due to the importance of the network meetings and the way in which these schools were challenged to reflect on the intentionality of their curricular and pedagogical choices, through moments of sharing and debate in small groups of schools. These meetings involved several teachers with middle management positions in these schools and encouraged their involvement and co-responsibility for the success of the project and their school. The analysis of the data shows, once more, the importance of school networks in the professional development of these principals and in the construction of their educational project.

3.6. Networks of Schools

If the TEIP programme and the PPIP were milestones for thinking about their institutions, they have in common the fact that they put these schools into networks. Both the TEIP programme and PPIP schools have the existence of school meetings with the Ministry of Education in their genesis: moments in which to share good practices and training sessions in areas that the ministry considers relevant. Reading the principals' speeches about these projects, we can see the importance that they attach to them and their role in the growth of their organizations.

> Or else, as we work in a network—our school works in a network—when we leave here and go to other schools, we disseminate what we do here, like our practices, our strategies and we bring them back. . . There we are confronted and

> we participate as speakers or whatever and then we also bring the feedback here and spread the good news to our colleagues and there is always this effort of constant outings as is usual in this cluster, with our partners from PIP1, now from PIP2 and from other network schools, from Erasmus. . . (FG SC Cristelo)

> So these experiences with TEIP, that TEIP brought us other opportunities, even made us aware of other realities, then the pedagogical innovation pilot project that made us aware of a network of people who even had the same interests as us and who sometimes even had the same difficulties that we had, and at the same time also shared several things and experiences that made us much better. And now, much more recently, with other mentoring projects between schools, which have also given us a completely different approach to what is done, both in our country and in other schools, where we have also been able to mentor other schools, which always brings added responsibility, because when you're learning you're absorbing everything, when you're mentoring someone you have the responsibility of being able to pass things on to others in a well-aligned way, so that it doesn't seem like it's all scattered in our heads. (Mário Rocha)

The analysis of the data allowed us to identify a series of milestones that characterized the lives of these two principals, who have in common that they lead schools in Educational Priority Intervention Territories. Mário Rocha's professional career is marked by the position he has held since 2007 as principal of the Cristelo school. It was at this time that there was a change in educational policies in terms of school administration and management, which ended the collegiate bodies that had existed until then, with schools now being managed by the principal, the pedagogical council and the general council. It was also during his first years as principal that he was invited to join the TEIP2 programme (2008). Although his school did not offer secondary education at the time, he accompanied the extension of the school age to 12 years in 2009. Mário started as a teacher in 2004 and his teaching career has been marked by educational policies of greater flexibility in managing the curriculum. The last few years have been milestones from the point of view of curricular flexibilization and pedagogical innovation, with integration into the PPIP. In the same point of view, the analyses of Cesário Silva's life path make it clear that he has lived through the construction of the Portuguese education system since he began working as a teacher in 1988 and, in 1991, with the legal framework for leadership in schools already in place, he became a member of the Executive Council—a collegiate body. He was in post for four school years, from 1995 to 2008 as a teacher and a coordinator of UNIVA, and invested in his academic training, taking a master's degree and a PhD. In 2009, he took on the role of principal—already with the new reconfiguration in terms of school leadership—and these years were very intense as he was invited to join TEIP (2012) and went through the re-organization of schools in Marinha Grande, which led to the creation of the Marinha Grande Poente School Cluster. At the end of that school year, he did not stand again and, in the absence of a successor, took over the leadership of the school as CAP. At the end of that school year, he stood for election as principal, was elected and has remained in the post to this day.

In summary, the triangulation of the life journeys of these two principals is marked by a series of experiences that are pressured by various changes in educational policies and by changes in their personal lives—both principals move to new places to live and start families. Thus, we realize that although there is continuity in their journeys in terms of leadership and their concern in understanding and learning more about the workings of the education system and schools, there are a number of discontinuities that are presented as milestones in their lives, namely the entry into the PhD program, the change in the legal

and financial framework of their school cluster with the entry into TEIP and, later, the challenge to join PPIP.

4. Conclusions

The aim of this research was to understand the events and experiences that contributed to the development of top leaders capable of thinking pedagogically and strategically about their organization in order to build more inclusive and innovative schools. A pedagogical leadership capable of mobilizing a community around a common project—that of contributing to the success of all students through differentiated, diverse and challenging practices. The analysis of the data collected through life narratives allowed us to identify a series of milestones that, due to the reflective capacity of their authors, were decisive for their professional development, namely, further studies; initial training; experience in management bodies; the Educational Territories of Priority Intervention programme, the Pedagogical Innovation Pilot Project and the school networks.

The life stories revealed the existence of pressure and responsibility associated with pursuing studies, as both principals were the first in their families to have this opportunity. Combined with their desire and love for learning, the formative experiences in their initial training were a source of their sense of belonging. The place of the students, the importance of the school and the goal of public schools were founding principles of their professional development.

Previous experience in management bodies enabled them to learn about and identify the organization's weaknesses, as well as their own and the need for training, which led to specialized training experiences (doctorate and post-graduate studies in school administration). These were decisive moments because of the importance of reflective thinking: reflection in action and on action with the support and supervision of other teacher-mentors, which they both describe as inexpressibly valuable. As leaders of their institutions, joining the TEIP programme provided structure because of the awareness of the experience gained and the importance of integrating schools with common problems into a network, namely the need to respond to the needs of students and their diversity. Joining PPIP challenged these principals to think "outside the box" in a networked project with six other schools, where constant questioning and reflection were the watchwords. Thus, these experiences were decisive, both in the words of the participants and as the data shows, for their professional development.

As Hargreaves (1994) points out, we realize that although we find common moments at different times in the lives of these principals and their institutions, their existence is not a condition for their professional development. What makes these moments structural is the way in which each one of them reflects on and resignifies them in the light of their sense of education and within their school culture. The milestones mentioned by the authors are, in fact, moments that mark a discontinuity in their school project: a discontinuity in the way that they see and think about their school that allows them to make a series of decisions to create a more inclusive school project. These moments, despite being moments of discontinuity—triggered by changes in educational policies, challenges inherent to their institutions and new professional challenges—are also part of a linear journey in their lives and in the lives of their institutions. And it is these moments, as they themselves point out in the interviews, that are essential turning points for their professional and personal development. With this research, we hope to have contributed to expanding knowledge in this field at a time when many principals are leaving Portuguese schools.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization: D.F.; methodology: D.F., R.T., A.B.; validation: D.F., R.T., A.B.; formal analysis: D.F.; investigation: D.F.; data curation: D.F.; writing—original draft preparation: D.F.; writing—review and editing: D.F., R.T., A.B.; visualization: D.F., R.T., A.B.; supervision: D.F.,

R.T., A.B.; project administration: D.F., R.T., A.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This work was supported partially by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, IP (FCT), within the multi-year funding awarded to CIIE [grants no. UID/00167/2023, UIDB/00167/2020 and UIDP/00167/2020].

Institutional Review Board Statement: This project was approved at a meeting of the Scientific Council of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto (Meeting Resolutions No. 04 /CC/2023, April 26).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. The nature of the project itself, which identifies the schools and principals involved, implied written acceptance of the participation of all those involved.

Data Availability Statement: Data is contained within the article.

Acknowledgments: A very special thanks to the two directors for the way they shared their stories, for the way they were moved and for how they allowed these to become part of the construction of knowledge about pedagogical and innovative leadership.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

SC	School cluster
DGE-ME	Directorate-General of Education—Ministry of Education
FG	Focus group
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAFC	Project for Autonomy and Curricular Flexibility
PPIP	Pedagogical Innovation Pilot Project
TEIP	Educational Territories of Priority Intervention

References

Acton, K. (2021). School leaders as change agents: Do principals have the tools they need? *Management in Education*, *35*, 43–51. [CrossRef]

Amado, J. (2014). A investigação em educação e seus paradigmas. In J. Amado (Ed.), *Manual de investigação qualitativa em educação* (2nd ed.). Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra.

Bolivar, A. (2014). Melhorar os processos e os resultados educativos. O que nos ensina a investigação. In J. Machado, & J. M. Alves (Eds.), *Melhorar a escola. Sucesso escolar, disciplina, motivação, direção de escolas e políticas educativas* (pp. 107–121). Universidade Católica Editora.

Bolívar, A. (2019). *Una dirección escolar con capacidad de liderazgo pedagógico*. Editoral Arco/Libros-La Muralla.

Bolívar-Botía, A. (2022). *Profissão-professor: O itinerário profissional e a construção da escola*. EDUSC.

Bolívar-Botía, A., & Segovia, J. D. (2019). *La investigación (auto)biográfica en educación*. Ediciones Octaedro.

Bolívar-Botía, A., & Segovia, J. D. (2024). *Comunidades de práctica profesional y mejora de los aprendizajes*. Editorial Graó.

Brown, C. A., & Borko, H. (1992). Becoming a mathematics teacher. In D. A. Grouws (Ed.), *Handbook of research on mathematics teachinh and learning* (pp. 209–239). Macmillan.

Campo, A., & Campo, E. (2017). Las tareas de la dirección y los estándares profesionales. *Organización y Gestión Educativa*, *25*(2), I–XII.

Day, C., & Sammons, P. (2013). *Successful leadership: A review of the international literature*. CfBT Education Trust.

Day, C., Sammons, P., Hopkins, D., Harris, A., Leithwood, K., Gu, Q., Brown, E., Ahtaridou, E., & Kington, A. (2009). *The impact of school leadership on pupil outcomes.* Final report. DCFS.

Desmarais, D. (2010). El enfoque biográfico. Cuestiones Pedagógicas. *Revista De Ciencias De La Educación*, *(20)*, 27–54. Available online: https://revistascientificas.us.es/index.php/Cuestiones-Pedagogicas/article/view/9891 (accessed on 1 March 2024).

Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think*. D.C. Heath and Co.

Esteves, M. (2006). Análise de conteúdo. In J. Á. d. Lima, & J. A. E. Pacheco (Eds.), *Fazer investigação: Contributos para a elaboração de dissertações e teses* (pp. 105–126). Porto Editora.

Fullan, M. G. (1991). *The new meaning of education change*. Cassel.

Gabinete do Secretário de Estado da Educação. (2017). *Despacho n.° 3721/2017, de 3 de maio. Diário da República n.° 85/2017, Série II de 2017-05-03, páginas 8324–8325*. Available online: https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/despacho/3721-2017-106958832 (accessed on 1 March 2024).

Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2003). *Os novos líderes. A inteligência emocional das organizações*. Gradiva.

Gonzales, M., Garza, T., & Leon-Zaragoza, E. (2024). Generating innovative ideas for school improvement: An examination of school principals. *Education Sciences*, *14*, 650. [CrossRef]

Goodson, I., Antikainen, A., Sikes, P., & Andrews, M. (2017). *International handbook on narrative and life history*. Routledge.

Hallinger, P. (2018). Bringing context out of the shadows of leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *46*, 5–24.

Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing teachers, changing times—Teachers' work and culture in the postmodern age*. Cassel.

Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2006). *Successful school leadership: What it is and how it influences pupil learning*. CfBT Education Trust.

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2008). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership. *School Leadership & Management*, *28*(1), 27–42. [CrossRef]

Leithwood, K., Seashore, L. K., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning: A review of research for the Learning from Leadership Project*. Wallace Foundation.

Ma, X., Shen, J., Reeves, P., Wu, H., Roberts, L., Zheng, Y., & Chen, Q. (2024). Effects of the "high impact leadership for school renewal" project on principal leadership, school leadership, and student achievement. *Education Science*, *14*(6), 600. [CrossRef]

Marzano, R., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. (2001). *School leadership that works*. ASCD.

Ministério da Educação. (1996). *Despacho n.° 147-B/ME/1996, de 1 de agosto. Diário da República n.° 177/1996, Série II de 1996-08-01*. Available online: https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/despacho/147-b-1996-1863460 (accessed on 1 March 2024).

Ministério da Educação. (1998). *Decreto-Lei n.° 115-A/1998, de 4 de maio. Diário da República n.° 102/1998, 1° Suplemento, Série I-A de 1998-05-04, páginas 1988-(2) a 1988-(15)*. Available online: https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/115-a-1998-155636 (accessed on 1 March 2024).

Ministério da Educação. (2001). *Decreto-Lei n.° 6/2001, de 18 de janeiro. Diário da República n.° 15/2001, Série I-A de 2001-01-18, páginas 258–265*. Available online: https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/6-2001-338986 (accessed on 1 March 2024).

Ministério da Educação. (2004). *Decreto-Lei n.° 74/2004 de 26 de março. Diário da República n.° 73/2004, Série I-A de 2004-03-26, páginas 1931–1942*. Available online: https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/74-2004-210801 (accessed on 1 March 2024).

Ministério da Educação. (2008a). *Decreto-Lei n.° 3/2008, de 7 de janeiro. Diário da República n.° 4/2008, Série I de 2008-01-07, páginas 154–164*. Available online: https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/3-2008-386871 (accessed on 1 March 2024).

Ministério da Educação. (2008b). *Decreto-Lei n.° 75/2008, de 22 de abril. Diário da República n.° 79/2008, Série I de 2008-04-22, páginas 2341–2356*. Available online: https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/75-2008-249866 (accessed on 1 March 2024).

Ministério da Educação. (2019). *Portaria n.° 181/2019, de 11 de junho. Diário da República n.° 111/2019, Série I de 2019-06-11, páginas 2954–2957*. Available online: https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/portaria/181-2019-122541299 (accessed on 1 March 2024).

Ministério da Educação e Ciência. (2012). *Decreto-Lei n.° 137/2012, de 2 de julho. Diário da República n.° 126/2012, Série I de 2012-07-02, páginas 3340–3364*. Available online: https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/137-2012-178527 (accessed on 1 March 2024).

Morgado, J. C. (2012). *O estudo de caso na investigação em educação*. De Facto Editores.

Nóvoa, A. (2022). *Escola e professores: Proteger, transformar, valorizar*. Salvador da Baía.

OECD. (2011). *Improving school leadership policy and practice*. pointers for policy development.

Pina, R., Cabral, I., & Alves, J. M. (2015). Principal's leadership on students' outcomes. *Procedia—Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *197*, 949–954. [CrossRef]

Popkewitzs, T. (1988). Los paradigmas en la ciencia de la educación: Sus significados y lafinalidad de la teoría. In T. Popkewitzs (Ed.), *Paradigma e ideología en investigación educativa* (pp. 61–88). Mondadori Espanã, S.A. Available online: https://pt.scribd.com/document/111141714/Popkewitz-Paradigma-e-ideologia-en-investigacion-educativa (accessed on 1 March 2024).

PORDATA. (2025). *Early school leaving rate*. Available online: https://www.pordata.pt/pt/estatisticas/educacao/qualificacoes-da-populacao/taxa-de-abandono-escolar-precoce-por-sexo?_gl=1*1f7ha81*_up*MQ..*_ga*NDExMzA4NTcxLjE3NDkxNzAxNTA.*_ga_HL9EXBCVBZ*czE3NDkxNzAxNTAkbzEkZzAkdDE3NDkxNzAxNTAkajYwJGwwJGgw (accessed on 1 March 2024).

Presidência do Conselho de Ministros. (2018a). *Decreto-Lei n.° 54/2018, de 6 de julho. Diário da República n.° 129/2018, Série I de 2018-07-06, páginas 2918–2928*. Available online: https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/54-2018-115652961 (accessed on 1 March 2024).

Presidência do Conselho de Ministros. (2018b). *Decreto-Lei n.° 55/2018, de 6 de julho. Diário da República n.° 129/2018, Série I de 2018-07-06, páginas 2928–2943*. Available online: https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/55-2018-115652962 (accessed on 1 March 2024).

Schow, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.

Schön, D. A. (1997). Formar professores como profissionais reflexivos. In A. Nóvoa (Ed.), *Os professores e a sua Formação* (pp. 77–91). Publicações D. Quixote.

Serrazina, L. (1999). *Desenvolvimento Profissional de Professores: Contributos para reflexão*. IX Seminário da Investigação em Educação Matemática.

Silva, J. M. (2010). *Líderes e lideranças escolares em escolas portuguesas: Protagonistas, práticas e impactos*. Fundação Manuel Leão.

Stoll, L., & Louis, K. (2007). *Professional learning communities: Divergence, depth and dilemmas*. Open University Press.

Trindade, R., & Cosme, A. (2024). *Escola e conhecimento: O vínculo incontornável*. Porto Editora.

Vala, J. (1999). Análise de conteúdo. In A. S. Silva, & J. M. Pinto (Eds.), *Metodologia das Ciências Sociais* (pp. 101–128). Edições Afrontamento.

Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Sage publications.

Weinstein, J., & Simielli, L. (2022). *Liderança escolar: Diretores como fatores-chave para a transformação da educação no Brasil*. NESCO.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.