

# Is there someone left behind? The role of school principals' in implementing Decree-law nº 54 in Portuguese schools

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## Abstract:

This study investigates the perceptions of 12 school principals in Portugal regarding the implementation of Decree-Law no 54/2018, as part of a broader research project titled "Assessment in Basic and Secondary Education: Teachers' Practices and Conceptions of Internal and External Assessment in Portuguese Schools," funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (CEECIND/03157/2018). Data were collected through exploratory interviews conducted in various regions of mainland Portugal. Principals highlighted both the challenges and opportunities presented by a diverse student body, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds. The findings reveal that school principals implement specific policies and practices to ensure appropriate support for students while also addressing the challenges of meeting their diverse needs. The study emphasises the critical role of school leadership in promoting and sustaining inclusive practices, highlighting the importance of effective management in creating an inclusive educational environment. Additionally, a relationship between inclusive practices and academic outcomes was also identified, with principals acknowledging the impact of inclusive education on student performance.

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## Keywords:

school principals'; inclusion; educational policies

## Fica alguém para trás? O papel dos diretores escolares na implementação do Decreto-Lei n.º 54 nas escolas portuguesas

**Resumo:** Este estudo investiga as perceções de 12 diretores de escolas em Portugal sobre a implementação do Decreto-Lei no 54/2018, no âmbito de um projeto de investigação mais amplo intitulado "Avaliação no Ensino Básico e Secundário: Práticas e Conceções dos Professores sobre Avaliação Interna e Externa nas Escolas Portuguesas", financiado pela Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (CEECIND/03157/2018). Os dados foram recolhidos através de entrevistas exploratórias realizadas em várias regiões de Portugal continental. Os diretores destacaram alguns desafios e as oportunidades apresentados por um corpo discente diversificado, particularmente os de origem imigrante. Os resultados revelam que os diretores implementam políticas e práticas específicas para garantir um apoio adequado aos alunos, ao mesmo tempo que enfrentam os desafios de satisfazer as suas necessidades. O estudo sublinha o papel fundamental da direção da escola na promoção e manutenção de práticas inclusivas, destacando a importância de uma gestão eficaz na criação de um ambiente educativo inclusivo. Além disso, foi também identificada uma relação entre as práticas inclusivas e os resultados académicos, com os diretores a reconhecerem o impacto da educação inclusiva no desempenho dos alunos.

**Palavras-chave:** diretores de escola; inclusão; políticas educacionais

## ¿Hay alguien que se queda atrás? El papel de los directores escolares en la implementación del Decreto-Ley n.º 54 en las escuelas portuguesas

**Resumen:** Este estudio investiga las percepciones de 12 directores de escuelas en Portugal sobre la aplicación del Decreto-Ley no 54/2018, como parte de un proyecto de investigación más amplio titulado «Evaluación en la Educación Básica y Secundaria: Prácticas y concepciones de los profesores sobre la evaluación interna y externa en las escuelas portuguesas», financiado por la Fundación Portuguesa para la Ciencia y la Tecnología (CEECIND/03157/2018). Los datos se recopilaron a través de entrevistas exploratorias realizadas en varias regiones de Portugal continental. Los directores destacaron tanto los desafíos como las oportunidades que presenta un alumnado diverso, en particular los de origen inmigrante. Los hallazgos revelan que los directores implementan políticas y prácticas específicas para garantizar un apoyo adecuado a los estudiantes, al tiempo que abordan los desafíos de satisfacer sus diversas necesidades. El estudio hace hincapié en el papel fundamental que desempeña el liderazgo escolar en la promoción y el mantenimiento de las prácticas integradoras, destacando la importancia de una gestión eficaz en la creación de un entorno educativo integrador. Además, también se identificó una relación entre las prácticas inclusivas y los resultados académicos, y los directores reconocieron el impacto de la educación inclusiva en el rendimiento de los alumnos.

**Palabras clave:** directores de centros escolares; inclusión; políticas educativas

## Quelqu'un est-il laissé pour compte ? Le rôle des chefs d'établissement dans la mise en œuvre du décret-loi n° 54 dans les écoles portugaises

**Résumé:** Cette étude examine les perceptions de 12 directeurs d'école au Portugal concernant la mise en œuvre du décret-loi no 54/2018, dans le cadre d'un projet de recherche plus large intitulé « Assessment in Basic and Secondary Education : Pratiques et conceptions des enseignants en matière d'évaluation interne et externe dans les écoles portugaises », financé par la Fondation portugaise pour la science et la technologie (CEECIND/03157/2018). Les données ont été collectées par le biais d'entretiens exploratoires menés dans différentes régions du Portugal continental. Les directeurs d'école ont souligné à la fois les défis et les opportunités présentés par un corps étudiant diversifié, en particulier ceux issus de l'immigration. Les résultats révèlent que les chefs d'établissement mettent en œuvre des politiques et des pratiques spécifiques pour assurer un soutien approprié aux élèves tout en relevant les défis liés à la satisfaction de leurs divers besoins. L'étude souligne le rôle essentiel de la direction de l'école dans la promotion et le maintien des pratiques inclusives, en mettant en évidence l'importance d'une gestion efficace dans la création d'un environnement éducatif inclusif. En outre, une relation entre les pratiques inclusives et les résultats scolaires a également été identifiée, les chefs d'établissement reconnaissant l'impact de l'éducation inclusive sur les performances des élèves.

**Mots clés:** directeurs d'école; inclusion; politiques éducatives

## Introduction

Educational leadership plays a crucial role in the operation and effectiveness of educational institutions. At the core of this approach, educational leaders such as school principals stand out, whose decisions and practices have direct implications on the quality of students' learning and academic environment (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Machado et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2021). The concept of the principals' effect is particularly linked to perspectives on successful leadership (see, for instance, Leithwood et al., 2006), underscoring the idea that leadership plays a pivotal role in the development of collaborative organisational learning, structures, cultures, inclusion and communities in creating a positive school environment and enhancing teaching quality (Eberts & Stone, 1988; Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Hallinger, 2010). School principals play a crucial role in creating inclusive environments by leading the implementation of policies and practices that promote the participation of all students, regardless of their differences. In this context, UNESCO emphasizes that every learner holds equal importance. However, millions of individuals across the globe remain excluded from education due to factors such as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, social background, language, religion, nationality, economic status, or ability. Inclusive education aims to identify and eliminate all obstacles to learning, addressing aspects ranging from curricula to teaching methods and pedagogy. Portugal is currently experiencing a swift increase in the number of war refugees and migrants from diverse countries. For this purpose, in 2024, the Directorate- General for Education issued a document outlining strategies to facilitate inclusion. These strategies aim to welcome diversity by including migrant students and their families, often in vulnerable situations, ensuring their well-being and successful integration into the educational system and host country. The document also emphasises educating for diversity, promoting the appreciation of different cultures, languages, and experiences, while encouraging participation and reflection in the school community to foster personal and collective development. Additionally, it stresses the importance of using information and knowledge to understand each student's specific circumstances, which is crucial for effective inclusion and personalised educational pathways. The document advocates for personalising teaching, learning, and assessment according to students' needs, following relevant legislation, and implementing universal design for learning. It also highlights the importance of engaging the community, as it plays a vital role in supporting inclusive educational practices (Direção-Geral da Educação, 2024). One of the main objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is to "leave no one behind," thus providing a "unique opportunity to build more inclusive and equitable societies" (UNESCO, 2017). Portugal has made significant progresses in creating a robust framework for inclusive education to meet the diverse needs of

all students. In 2018, the enactment of Decree Law 54/2018 on Inclusive Education, along with Decree Law 55/2018 concerning Autonomy and Curriculum Flexibility, introduced a comprehensive set of guiding documents. This updated framework views inclusive education as an ongoing process that requires the education system to be reformed and consistently evaluated to effectively address the needs of every student (OECD, 2022). Particularly, the Decree-Law No. 54/2018, dated July 6, establishes the principles and norms that ensure inclusion as a process aimed at addressing the diverse needs and potentials of every student. This is achieved by enhancing participation in learning processes and in the life of the educational community (Article 1, paragraph 1). Taking a clearly inclusive perspective, this decree-law, along with the regulations regarding the curriculum for basic and secondary education and the Profile of Students at the End of Compulsory Education, serves as both a catalyst and a framework for implementing changes at the organisational level and in the educational process itself. Thus, this decree (i) moves away from categorising students, including those with special educational needs; (ii) discontinues the special legislation model for these students; (iii) establishes a continuum of responses applicable to all students; (iv) focuses on educational responses rather than on student categories; and (v) considers the mobilisation of resources from health, employment, vocational training, and social security in a complementary manner when necessary and appropriate. Thus, this study, which is part of a larger research project titled “Assessment in Basic and Secondary Education: Teachers’ Practices and Conceptions of Internal and External Assessment in Portuguese Schools,” funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (CEECIND/03157/2018), aims to explore school principals’ perspectives on inclusion. Specifically, it focuses on their perceptions of Decree-Law no. 54/2018, examining how they interpret and implement inclusive education policies, the challenges they face, and the strategies they employ to create an environment that accommodates the diverse needs of all students.

### **Studies on inclusion in the Portuguese context**

Although equality in access to education and schooling is now almost guaranteed in Portugal, the goal of achieving truly inclusive and equitable education for all students remains distant (Neiva et al., 2017). In fact, according to Sousa (2022), the transition between decrees is still in progress, with ongoing challenges linked to the terminology used by educators and the broader educational community, which reveals more than just communication issues. It highlights a deeper social challenge, rooted in the difficulty of shifting paradigms and embracing new educational approaches (Sousa, 2022). Studies in the Portuguese context show that not all of schools has implemented the various measures proposed by the decree due to the lack of human

and material resources as the main obstacle to educational changes. In addition, the excessive bureaucracy required by the decree was a common negative factor mentioned, who nevertheless appreciated the abolition of student categorisation and the inclusive nature of the law, which seeks to address the needs of all students (Fonseca, 2022). While Portugal has made advances in promoting social justice and equity by ensuring universal access to education and academic success considering the specific needs of each student (Castanho, 2020), research indicates that significant challenges remain. These include the lack of adequate conditions in schools to accommodate the growing number of students requiring learning and inclusion support, a shortage of professionals trained in special education, the bureaucracy associated with implementing these processes (Fontes & Silva, 2024; Fonseca, 2020), and insufficient teacher training to fully realise the decree's goals (Faria, 2021). However, the study by Seabra and colleagues emphasised that equity and inclusion is considered in the reports of External School Evaluation, suggesting that the scope of inclusion is broad, extending beyond students with learning difficulties or special educational needs (SEN) to include those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and foreign students, particularly those who do not speak Portuguese as their first language (Seabra et al., 2020).

## Method

The main goal of this study is to analyse the school principals' perceptions regarding the operationalisation of Decree-Law No. 54 in 12 schools/school clusters. Among these 12 schools, 3 are ranked among the 7 best public secondary schools in Portugal and 3 are ranked among the 7 secondary schools with the lowest academic results. Furthermore, the other 3 schools are classified among the 7 best basic schools in Portugal, while the remaining 3 are classified as 7 basic schools with lower academic results. Data was collected through exploratory semi-structured interviews with principals of school clusters/ schools (see table 1). The sample consisted of 12 school principals (7 male and 5 female). Most participants were between 51 and 60 years of age, with one participant aged over 65 and three participants under the age of 50. In terms of academic qualifications, the majority held a Master's degree (n=11), while only one held a Doctorate. The principals were from schools located in mainland Portugal, with most of the interviewees coming from schools in the central region of the country.

**Table 1**  
*Characteristics of the principals who participated in the interviews*

<b>GENDER</b>	<i>f</i>
Male	7
Female	5
<b>AGE</b>	
40-45	
45-50	
51-55	
56-60	
More than 65	
<b>DEGREE</b>	
Master Degree	11
Doctorate	1
<b>SCHOOL LOCATION</b>	
Centre of Portugal	7
North of Portugal	3
South of Portugal	2
<b>TYPE OF SCHOOL</b>	
School Cluster	6
Non-clustered school	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	12

The interview covers six discussion topics, however in this study we focus particularly on the topic of educational policies implemented, namely de Decree-law no54/2018. The selected schools were contacted, and permission was sought from the principals to conduct the interviews. The research project was approved by the Ethics Committee for Research in Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of Minho (CEICSH 134/2022) as well as authorization from the DGE to carry out the study in a school environment (Ref.a 0803500001). Aspects related to the objectives of the study, as well as ethical issues, were clarified by the researcher before the interview took place. To analyse the data, content analysis was used to analyse the content of messages (Bardin, 1977), allowing to make inferences by systematically and objectively identifying the specific characteristics of a message (Esteves, 2006).

Thus, analysis and coding were carried out based on the interpretation of messages through a comparison between the previous reference framework and the empirical material collected, including categories that emerged from the data. An individual analysis of each interview was carried out, followed by a cross-analysis to find response patterns and recurring themes (Huberman & Miles, 1994). For the purposes of intersubjective validation, the strategy of “checking” (Creswell, 1998) was used between the researchers involved in the analysis process to systematize the data and its interpretation.

## Findings

From the interviews, four primary categories were identified that clarify how school principals perceive and address issues related to inclusion. The first category explores the impact of students from diverse cultural backgrounds due to emigration. It examines how principals face the challenges posed by cultural differences. The second category focuses on the inclusion of students with Special Educational Needs. It looks at the policies principals employ to ensure these students receive appropriate support and resources. It also reflects on the challenges faced in meeting their diverse needs and the innovative approaches adopted to enhance their educational experiences. The third category addresses students' academic performance, focusing on the relationship between inclusion and academic outcomes. The fourth category is related with school management and leadership for inclusion, highlighting the role of school leadership in promoting inclusive practices.

### Interculturality and emigration

Most of school principals' responses highlight the importance of interculturality in schools, especially when it comes to welcoming foreign students. However, they also point out that inclusion goes beyond language proficiency and encompasses a variety of international programmes and initiatives. School principals recognise interculturality not only as a feature of recent immigration, but also as part of international exchange programmes that promote the exchange of cultural and educational experiences. Although the number of non-native-speaking students is sometimes small, schools promote cultural diversity and value inclusion at different levels.

*“There’s also another aspect, which is interculturality, but that doesn’t really come from what we’re thinking about, but from the projects, the international projects we have and the exchanges. I can tell you that we only have ten students in Portuguese*

*as a non-native language this year. This already has to do with the influx that's happening, doesn't it? And immigration." (P.2)*

*"We welcome students from a wide range of backgrounds. It is inclusive on that level. This high school is a school that has some procedures that are a little conservative. It has a certain consolidated culture given the number of years the school has been in existence and then, as they like to interact a lot, I favour working in pairs, or in the case of mentoring in the classroom. In other words, there's one or two or three and it depends on learning. Because we must be careful to go through everyone. So that there is no exclusion here, so that there are no underdogs, I don't know what. No, no. I don't advocate that at all." (P.5)*

*"The school is located in one of the better socio-cultural areas of the city, making it an urban space primarily attended by students from high socioeconomic backgrounds. Although this has slightly changed with the influx of migrants due to wars, many students come from abroad, including a significant number from Brazil. This issue presents some challenges for schools, as they are not adequately prepared." (P.6)*

The complexity of inclusion is even more evident in schools with a great diversity of nationalities. Cultural and linguistic inclusion in this context requires an articulation with social issues such as housing and mobility, factors that directly impact the lives of students.

*"It is an urban area with a highly diverse population, including many migrants. One of the current problems we face is the high number of foreign students, which generates constant and daily challenges. Every day, we are receiving foreign students whose primary language is not Portuguese, so this brings us significant challenges!" (P.8)*

*"We belong to the TEIP network, we have some difficulty due to the issue of nationalities, we currently have around 40 nationalities present, more than 40 nationalities present in our school, and around 38% of foreign students, even foreigners, if you consider the parents, then the numbers accelerate a lot, it will be close to 50%, we have around 50% of A and B students, apart from the situations that are not yet properly legalised to get more social support (...) we are in a very fragile area, despite being in the heart of the city of Lisbon." (P.9)*

*"There are even a lot of constraints, because the housing stock is old, and there is a lot of demographic pressure from immigrants, but also from many tourists, isn't there? We have a lot of inequality here, a little social, a little difficult at this stage of the year, at this stage of the extension year. The language issue itself, isn't it? That's not easy either." (P.10)*

## Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

The inclusion of students with SEN emerges as a central issue, with school principals expressing the need for personalised support and the importance of multidisciplinary teams to ensure that these students are not excluded from the educational process. The school principals also emphasise the fact that students with SEN are considered in the school's internal evaluation, although they are not counted in national rankings. This shows a commitment to valuing the individual progress of these students, without the pressure of external indicators.

*"Because the students are all learning no matter what. Whether with one strategy or another, everyone learns. They learn differently. But they learn in different ways. We can't be the same, they're not the same. But we must learn, even if we learn what is essential. We can see that the essential learning has been done a little nonsensically. I fully agree with what has been done. But I'm very suspicious."* (P. 5)

*"Students with specific needs also count... they don't really count in the ranking, but they count in our assessment."* (P.6)

*"To be as inclusive as possible, considering the characteristics of our students, we truly have to be. These demands are increasing, and we must respond accordingly. We have to integrate and include not only foreign students, but also the growing number of students with special educational needs."* (P.12)

Additionally, some school principals emphasise the inclusion of students with SEN as a growing demand, driven by the diversity of the student body. Inclusion goes beyond a mere ideal, being a responsibility that the school feels the need to take on in a practical way, with strategies aimed at integrating these students into the school environment. The presence of multidisciplinary teams is seen as essential to accompany the cases of students with greater difficulties. The term 'pedagogical slippage' suggests a proactive vision of school management, where rapid intervention is necessary to prevent school failure.

*"The multidisciplinary support teams for inclusive education, which are also fundamental for accompanying both the class directors and the pedagogical council in the implementation, and the director in the definition and implementation of measures, in the design of measures, so that there is also an improvement in the students' learning. Especially in those situations that we call pedagogical slippage, so to speak, where if we don't intervene it's going to go wrong, and we must intervene. And so, this leadership is fundamental"* (P.10)

## Students' academic performance

Students' academic performance is assessed differently, with principals recognising that students have diverse abilities and trajectories, expressing an inclusive view of assessment, where success is measured according to each student's individual potential. The emphasis is on recognising everyone's effort and ability, rather than standardising expectations. Rankings and external assessment emerge as an ambivalent issue, while they are recognised as important for the education system, they are also seen as inadequate to reflect the reality of inclusive schools. The disconnect between rankings and the reality of inclusive schools is highlighted by school principals, who state that students with SEN, although important for internal assessment, are not considered in national rankings.

*"Of course, we always aim for the best, but the best we want is the best that each student can achieve. If a student's maximum is a 14, then that's what we value — it doesn't have to be a 20. We want a 20 from those who can reach a 20, and a 14 from those for whom that is their highest achievement. Those 14 matters. This is a school with students who have specific needs, and they count — not necessarily in the rankings, but certainly in our internal assessment."* (P.12)

*"We must consider these issues of inclusion and whether the student succeeds"* (P. 11)

*"The national external assessment seems important and necessary to me even though we're in a very fragile area, we have to deal with the pressure of the ranking."* (P.1)

*"We have students with specific needs who also count... they don't really count in the ranking, but they count in our self-evaluation."* (P.3)

*"The decree-law 54 is just as important as decree-law 55, for us. We don't usually see one without the other. And they have been instruments that have made us think a lot. Just as the regulations are associated with them"* (P.8)

*"However, we must prioritise inclusion and consider whether the student can demonstrate their abilities. For us, it's important to evaluate that as the student's maximum potential, but the assessment should always aim to enhance what the student can achieve."* (P.5)

## School Management and Leadership for Inclusion

Although in fewer number, some principals emphasise the importance of strong leadership committed to creating an inclusive culture, where all members of the school community, from teachers to key staff, share the same values. School principals

especially emphasise teachers as key players in implementing practices that promote inclusion, equity and the success of all students and the need of schools' autonomy as a way of ensuring that inclusive values permeate the entire institution.

*“ And there has been a need here over the years to create an inclusive, assertive culture, a school for all, in which we all really put our shirts on and really believe in these criteria. The journey we have been on since 2009, when we applied for the TEIP, has always been one of consolidating our culture, let's put it this way: we hold various events to maintain the culture. Let's say we have a great reputation as teachers, and we need a way to transfer it.” (P.9)*

*“Now, the decree-law no. 54 is extremely important. It is true that it takes time to implement changes. Recently, I was in other countries and realised that laws do not change overnight. This happens over decades. Here, a new government comes into power, regardless of which one it is, and they immediately change the laws. Law 54 is fundamental, provided that the autonomy of schools is guaranteed. Schools need to have autonomy.” (P.4)*

*“I come from the field of special education, I went to Finland and their model was similar to our decree-Law no.54. I questioned whether there were any issues with acceptance, and they said no; it is perfectly implemented without any problems, and it works well. Here, we have difficulties implementing the 54 because there are several factors at play. We might only fully implement Law 54 in about 4 or 5 years; I'm not sure if we'll change it in 10 years. We cannot rigorously implement the model as we're discussing Law 54 because we previously had another framework that was in place for some time before it changed. The philosophy of the previous decree was already good, and this one remains good; we just need to allow the processes to be applied effectively.” (P.12)*

We also analysed the perceptions of school principals to understand whether there are differences between schools ranked higher and lower. We found that the issues of immigration and interculturality are common themes in the discourse of all the principals. However, the other categories do not show significant differences between the higher and lower-ranked schools, between secondary and primary schools nor between cluster and non-clustered schools.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Currently, Portugal is witnessing a rapid inflow of war refugees and migrants from various countries being the intercultural inclusion a priority in schools, particularly those with a high diversity of foreign students. In the principals' perceptions, the

management of these schools struggles to balance the welcoming of immigrant students with the preservation of established educational traditions. While inclusion is promoted through exchange programs and support for students from different backgrounds, challenges related to cultural and social adaptation are particularly evident in more vulnerable areas. According to an OECD review, the education systems play a crucial role as socialisation tools for both immigrants and host communities, helping to promote mutual understanding, respect, and trust. However, many educational institutions face challenges in providing adequate language training for migrants, which is essential for their integration into new communities. This issue was echoed by the principals, who highlighted that language barriers can significantly hinder students' progress, and that schools often lack the necessary resources to address this gap. Furthermore, migrants who wish to preserve their native language should also have opportunities to do so, those who moved to the country at a later age, encounter challenges, as they must learn in a language, they are not fluent in, and often, their parents face similar difficulties (OECD, 2015). Other studies indicate the necessity of promoting more inclusive and intercultural initiatives within schools. By integrating relevant training into the teacher education curriculum, educators can be significantly better prepared to support recently arrived migrant students effectively (Martin & Cerzo, 2024). Additionally, professional learning programmes that emphasises inclusive teaching practices (Faria, 2021), clear guidelines and a coordinated support framework at the local level is necessary to help schools and school clusters promote equity and inclusion (OECD, 2022). The principals' approach also reflects a conscious effort to transform interculturality into a positive factor for the school, despite the structural difficulties they face. The inclusion of students with special educational needs demands continuous and coordinated work between school management and support teams. Although rankings may not accurately reflect the success of these students, principals place significant importance on the progress they make within the school environment. Their commitment to inclusion is palpable, evident in the appreciation of each student, regardless of their abilities or limitations. Additionally, the role of multidisciplinary teams is crucial in ensuring that students with SEN receive appropriate support and interventions that can prevent further difficulties in the learning process. The term "pedagogical slippage" suggests a proactive view of school management, where timely intervention is necessary to avoid academic failure. Studies carried out in the Portuguese context, indicate that support measures are implemented as needed, focusing on universal strategies and pedagogical differentiation by teachers (Tavares, 2021). However, there is a need for updating the current framework to include specific guidelines for supporting students with SEN and those with a history of academic underachievement (Bonança et al., 2023). Principals see themselves as leaders capable of mobilising the school community around common goals, ensuring

that inclusive practices are integral to school life. An inclusive culture is not viewed solely as the responsibility of management; it is something that must be embraced by the entire school, with teachers actively contributing to its consolidation. Rankings serve as a pressure factor for schools, especially those that prioritise inclusion. While external assessments are seen as necessary, there is a recognition that the current evaluation criteria fail to capture the complexities of schools with students who have SEN or high levels of cultural diversity. This creates tension between the pressure to improve rankings and the necessity to address the genuine needs of students. Studies in this domain, found a lack of adequate teacher training on assessment in inclusive education. While teachers recognise and apply the necessary adaptations to the assessment process, they admit that, due to insufficient training, they face difficulties in implementing some of these adjustments. Despite these challenges, teachers believe they provide students with the full right to have assessed (Pinto, 2022). Overall, interviews with school principals reveal a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the challenges and strategies related to inclusion. Schools, in various contexts, confront complex realities involving interculturality, the inclusion of students with SEN, the establishment of an inclusive culture, and the pressure for academic results and ranking positions. In fact, despite the progress made, Portugal faces ongoing challenges in effectively managing resources and implementing inclusive education across all levels. To address these issues, the OECD recommends enhancing governance through better synergies and accountability mechanisms among various educational stages, emphasising the importance of collaboration and consultation strategies to deepen the understanding of inclusive education. Additionally, the team suggest improving resource management and developing a cohesive funding system for promoting equity and inclusion. Finally, strengthening monitoring and evaluation processes at the system level will further support these efforts (OECD, 2022). Principals demonstrate a clear commitment to inclusion and the adaptation of educational practices to meet the needs of all students, valuing individual progress and the potential of each learner. Simultaneously, they acknowledge the need to reassess evaluation systems and expectations imposed by external educational policies, so that these reflect the diversity and realities of their schools more fairly. Thus, this study reinforces the relevance of Decree-Law No. 54/2018 by highlighting the gap between inclusive policy goals and the everyday realities faced by school leaders. While the commitment to inclusion is evident, the findings underline the urgent need for more robust frameworks that ensure schools have the conditions to enact inclusive measures effectively. Practically, this includes more targeted teacher training, language support structures, and sustained investment in multidisciplinary teams. On a policy level, the results call for a revision of evaluation models to reflect the diversity and complexity of school contexts. A more inclusive model that ensures accountability,

equitable resource allocation, and collaborative leadership is essential for advancing the systemic implementation of inclusive education. These insights suggest that the success of Decree-Law No. 54/2018 depends not only on its legal foundations, but on its translation into coordinated, adequately supported practices in schools. Future longitudinal studies could track the evolution of inclusive practices over time, assessing their impact on learning outcomes and the integration of both migrant students and those with SEN. Another valuable research avenue would be to explore the perspectives of the students themselves regarding the effectiveness of inclusive practices and the accommodations made in assessment processes. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding and help tailor school strategies to better meet the perceived needs of these students.

### Acknowledges:

This work was financed by National Funds through the FCT - Portuguese Foundation For Science and Technology under the project "Assessment in Basic and Secondary Education: teachers practices and conceptions of internal and external assessment in Portuguese schools" (CEEC-IND/03517/2018) and under the CIEC (Research Centre on Child Studies) projects.

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Data de Submissão: outubro de 2024

Data de Avaliação: dezembro de 2024

Data de Publicação: julho 2025