

MIDDLE LEADERSHIP AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN PORTUGUESE SCHOOLS ABROAD: CASES FROM CAPE VERDE AND MOZAMBIQUE

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Abstract

Our study explores the intersection of Portugal's cooperation policies with the PALOP (Portuguese-speaking African Countries) and inclusive education, focusing on the role of middle leadership in fostering inclusive practices. Since the independence of these former Portuguese colonies following the 1974 democratic revolution, Portugal has established a network of 27 schools in 7 countries across Africa, Asia, and Oceania, all managed under the Portuguese Ministry of Education. These schools aim to contribute to local development while implementing Portuguese educational policies. In recent decades, the Portuguese education system has undergone significant reforms, emphasizing school autonomy and leadership. Middle leaders, in particular, have emerged as key actors in promoting professional development for teachers, improving teaching quality, and advancing inclusive education. Guided by the theory of practice architectures, this study investigates the practices of middle leaders in two Portuguese public schools abroad: one in Cape Verde and one in Mozambique. The goal is to identify how local practices enable or constrain the implementation of inclusive education policies and to uncover the contextual factors shaping these practices. Using qualitative and exploratory methodology, we analyse the "sayings," "doings," and "interactions" of local actors to understand the dynamics of middle leadership in these settings. We aim to determine whether the implementation of Portuguese educational policies in these schools fosters the emancipation of local citizens or perpetuates forms of neocolonialism under the guise of development aid.

Keywords: *Middle leadership, inclusive education, Portuguese schools in Cape Verde and Mozambique, (de)colonization, development aid and neocolonialism, emancipation versus acculturation.*

1. Introduction

The increasing establishment of Portuguese schools in the African countries of Portuguese official language (PALOP) has attracted our attention. Currently, there are 27 Portuguese schools abroad, distributed as follows: three in Cape Verde, one in Guinea-Bissau, three in São Tomé and Príncipe, fourteen in Angola, four in Mozambique, one in Macau, and one in East Timor. Of these, 19 are private and 8 are public schools. While private schools mainly adopt the Portuguese curriculum, public schools are entirely governed by the Portuguese Ministry of Education, with oversight in all aspects, including curriculum, school organisation (administrative structure, regulations, and leadership), infrastructure, and financing.

Grounded in an analysis of the role of middle leaders in the execution of inclusive education policies, this study aims to contribute to a critical debate on the challenges and contradictions within the cooperation policies between Portugal and the PALOP countries. Portuguese schools in these countries are often framed as instruments of cooperation for development, but they also reflect transnational dynamics that reconfigure Portuguese influence in the African context.

The focus on middle leaders within these schools is due to their strategic position within the educational system. As Gurr (2024, p. 2) notes, "middle leaders in schools will typically have a formal leadership role alongside a substantial teaching role." These leaders are pivotal in enacting educational policies, serving as intermediaries between school administration and teaching staff, while having direct access to students and their families. They play a critical role in translating educational policies into practice, fostering pedagogical innovation, and ensuring quality teaching. In an era of increasing school autonomy and accountability, middle leaders are crucial for the successful implementation and sustainability of education reforms (Costa et al., 2001; Barroso, 2005; Ventura et al., 2006; Lima, 2011; Bastos, 2019).

A key question arises: to what extent do these schools foster inclusive education with a social impact, or do they, instead, perpetuate dependency and cultural hegemony? Educational cooperation may function as a soft power, maintaining Portugal's cultural and linguistic presence in the PALOP countries. Despite the intentions of Portuguese schools to support progress in those countries, there are concerns that their curriculum and framework may uphold colonial legacies by prioritising Portuguese values, language, and culture. This could lead to the marginalisation of local cultures and knowledge systems, further entrenching unequal power dynamics.

2. Design

To analyse the role of middle leaders, we employ the theory of practice architectures (Mahon et al., 2017; Edwards-Groves, 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2024), which explores the economic-material, socio-political, and cultural-discursive arrangements influencing the promotion of inclusive education in schools. This theoretical framework helps examine the roles of middle leaders in fostering inclusive education through three key arrangements:

- **Economic-material arrangements:** Middle leaders advocate for the resources needed to ensure that infrastructure and materials support accessibility and inclusion.
- **Socio-political arrangements:** Middle leaders play a key role in implementing inclusion policies, translating legislation into practice, and representing teachers and students within governance structures.
- **Cultural-discursive arrangements:** They influence school values, raise awareness of diversity, integrate inclusive content into the curriculum, and support teachers in adopting inclusive pedagogical practices.

This framework positions middle leaders as essential mediators in fostering inclusive education.

From a post-colonial and decolonial perspective (Melber et al., 2024), it is vital to question whether these institutions promote inclusive educational development or, inadvertently, perpetuate dependency, and cultural hegemony and contribute to perpetuating social re-existing structures and dynamics.

2.1. Objective

This study is driven by the research question: How do middle leaders contribute to enacting inclusive education practices in two Portuguese schools in Cape Verde and Mozambique? Accordingly, its overarching objective is to examine the role of middle leaders in these schools in fostering inclusive education and identifying strategies and practices that promote a more inclusive learning environment.

On the other hand, as we also inscribe our reflection on the broader problem of development aid, we also ask to what extent these schools contribute to social transformation, intending to identify those schools' impact on the society they serve.

2.2. Methods

The study employed a qualitative, exploratory methodology, enabling the attribution of meaning to phenomena and a deeper understanding of their contexts (Creswell, 2014). Semi-structured online interviews were conducted with teachers in middle leadership roles to capture their perspectives and experiences regarding inclusive education. The interviews focused on key themes, including teaching roles, hierarchical structures, communication, perceptions, and contextual factors. The interviews captured participants' perceptions regarding their teaching roles, hierarchical structure, communication, collaboration, and contextual factors.

Content analysis (Bardin, 2010) was used as the data analysis technique, facilitated by the Qualitative Data Analysis Software (WebQDA). Ethical considerations and data protection measures were upheld from the initial contact with the school boards, who granted authorisation for the study. All ethical considerations were met, ensuring anonymity by assigning each teacher a code (P1–P11).

2.3. Context

2.3.1. The Escola Portuguesa de Moçambique (EPM). EPM was established in 1999 under a Cooperation Agreement between Portugal and Mozambique. Its main objectives were to promote the Portuguese language and culture, expand basic and secondary education, and provide access to schooling for both Portuguese and Mozambican students (Dec-lei nº 241/99 de 25 de junho).

EPM operates with cultural, pedagogical, administrative, and financial autonomy, executing the Portuguese curriculum. It also serves as a teacher training and resource centre. Funded by the Portuguese State and student tuition fees, its teaching staff includes local and Portuguese teachers, with the latter receiving relocation and residence allowances.

Currently, 24 years after its founding, EPM has 1,610 students and 147 teachers. The majority of students are Mozambican (51%), followed by Portuguese (47%) and Brazilian (8%). The remaining students come from various nationalities, ranging from neighbouring South Africa to the United States and Cuba, among others (CAP, 2024). The tuition fees paid by these students vary between €295 (pre-school) and €230 (other cycles). Depending on the number of siblings attending the school, families can benefit from a reduction in fees (EPM-CELP, 2025).

2.3.2. The Escola Portuguesa de Cabo-Verde (EPCV). EPCV was established by Decree-Law No. 213/2015, following a 2012 education cooperation protocol between Portugal and Cape Verde. The initiative aimed to promote the Portuguese language and culture globally while strengthening ties with Portuguese-speaking countries.

Like EPM, EPCV operates with administrative, financial, and pedagogical autonomy, formalised through an autonomy contract. As part of a new generation of Portuguese public schools abroad, it has flexibility in curriculum management and class organisation to adapt to local needs.

The school director oversees all administrative, financial, pedagogical, and cultural aspects. The pedagogical council, chaired by the director and composed of middle leaders, coordinates educational supervision, student guidance, and teacher training.

EPCV is funded similarly to EPM, with Portuguese staff receiving the same financial support. Currently, 12 years after its founding, EPCV has 996 students and 87 teachers. It has not yet been possible to collect the data regarding the students' nationalities and tuition fees.

3. Discussion

The sample of 11 interviewees comprises teachers from various educational levels. The majority—five—teach in the first cycle of basic education, four in the second cycle, one in the third cycle, and one in pre-school. Regarding their roles, four are year coordinators, two are coordinators of class directors, two are department coordinators, two are class directors, and one is a sub-coordinator of the curricular department. In terms of experience in their current roles, three have been in post for 11 years or more, three for 5–10 years, three for 2–4 years, and two for a year or less. Concerning their teaching experience in Portuguese schools in the PALOP, five have worked for 11 years or more, two for 5–10 years, three for 2–4 years, and one for a year or less. Thus, the sample comprises teachers with diverse educational backgrounds, roles, and professional experience.

Regarding economic and material arrangements, the interviewees' responses did not focus on financial incentives, such as the remuneration support provided by Portuguese schools in the PALOP. Instead, they emphasised intrinsic and relational motivations, highlighting the importance of a collaborative work environment and recognition of individual contributions. The middle leaders valued the enjoyment of their work, the leadership of teams, and the role of bridging communication between “the management board and the teachers” (P6). They also emphasised their contribution to student development, through “the constant transmission and exchange of knowledge and values between several generations” (P1). Additionally, they highlighted the significance of conflict resolution and the promotion of a positive and respectful school atmosphere, as noted by P6: “cordiality, positive, collaborative work, and respect for the individuality of all those involved.” These factors emerged as key motivators for their engagement in middle leadership roles.

Concerning socio-political arrangements, middle leaders recognised their role as essential in maintaining educational quality and administrative efficiency. They reported responsibilities in coordinating, supervising, and monitoring school activities, particularly in the pedagogical-didactic domain, student guidance, and teacher performance evaluation. Their role as intermediaries within the hierarchical structure was evident, as they received instructions from senior management while guiding teachers and students. Their contributions to fostering a collaborative and positive learning environment were widely acknowledged, with some respondents stressing the importance of “articulation between other teachers, students, and guardians, as well as parental involvement (...) to improve conflict management and raise awareness of the importance of school” (P7). However, they also identified challenges related to communication and bureaucracy. While email was a widely used and efficient method, some noted that the volume of emails was overwhelming (P3), and additional communication tools such as WhatsApp, phone calls, and meetings were necessary. Despite recognising the benefits of meetings in facilitating discussions, some respondents found them inefficient due to “deviations and a loss of time” (P5). Furthermore, bureaucratic procedures and excessive administrative tasks were cited as barriers, with P2 and P8 mentioning that “too many tasks are going on at the same time.”

In cultural-discursive arrangements, most respondents felt positively regarded within their school communities by students, colleagues, senior management, and families, though this perception was not unanimous. They reinforced the importance of collaboration, effective communication, and strong relationships for successfully carrying out their roles. However, significant challenges persisted, particularly the lack of specific training for middle leadership roles and time constraints. Many interviewees expressed concerns that these limitations hindered their ability to fulfil their responsibilities effectively. One respondent pointed out “the absence of formal preparation and excessive workload can make the function overwhelming” (P4). These findings underscore the need for institutional support to create a more cohesive and integrated work environment.

Given the sources of job satisfaction highlighted by participants, ongoing recognition and support for middle leaders are crucial to support and enhance satisfaction. Many respondents expressed a sense of fulfilment with their role in shaping students' educational experiences and fostering strong connections within the school community. Their work plays therefore a pivotal role in promoting success and fostering inclusive school environments. As Wilkinson et al. (2024) have demonstrated, middle leadership is instrumental in articulating the various dimensions of school structures to create more inclusive educational spaces that benefit the entire school community.

However, the findings did not reveal notable contextual differences between the two schools studied. Although middle leaders consistently emphasised the quality of education provided and the capacity to adapt curricula to local contexts, the study did not capture how educational inclusion is enacted, nor did it clarify whether these schools foster emancipation or acculturation. Nevertheless, given that these institutions were established for “the dissemination of the Portuguese language and culture worldwide,” it is plausible that acculturation is a more prominent outcome. On the other hand, considering the tuition fees paid by families, and although the majority of students at EPM are Mozambican, we question whether the educational inclusion policy will have a social impact in these contexts, given that the tuition fees paid per student at EPM are considerably higher than the minimum wage, which ranges from €75 (fishing of Kapenta) to €215 (large mining companies) (República de Moçambique, 2024). These data indicate that the Mozambican students at EPM come solely from middle and high-income families.

4. Conclusions

Middle leaders emerge as fundamental pillars in the implementation of educational policies. These leaders are key to ensuring the sustainability of educational reforms and promoting an inclusive and high-quality school environment, benefiting the entire school community.

In the specific case of the two schools under analysis, although the collected data did not show significant contextual differences, the testimony of the middle leaders reaffirms the commitment to quality and the adaptation of pedagogical practices to the needs of students. However, the perception of inclusion as emancipation versus acculturation does not yet emerge clearly in the preliminary results, indicating an area that requires continuous attention and renewed research efforts.

However, based on the data about EPM, we can hypothesise that the lack of evidence collected regarding the difficulties faced by middle management in promoting inclusive education, specifically the absence of references to the conditions of the students, arises from the socio-cultural proximity between the professionals and the students attending the school. This hypothesis seems to be reinforced by the relationship we have established between the tuition fees at EPM and the minimum wage of the Mozambican population. The educational service analysed appears to be inaccessible to the most disadvantaged segments of Mozambican society. Therefore, we can affirm that this service serves to maintain a social structure and its power relations. This is an analysis we will further develop in the ongoing research.

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