Does External School Evaluation Promote Inclusion? Leadership Voices in a Case Study

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Abstract

This study explores how the principles of inclusive education are operationalised within a school cluster in Portugal, and to what extent the External School Evaluation Programme (ESEP), led by the General Inspectorate of Education and Science (IGEC), contributes to this process. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research combines the analysis of key organisational documents and the IGEC's evaluation report with semi-structured interviews conducted with two school leadership members: the Headteacher and the Self-Evaluation Coordinator. The discussion focuses on the role of leadership in implementing inclusive policies, highlighting the challenges associated with transforming pedagogical practices and applying IGEC recommendations within the organisational context. The analysis, supported by MaxQDA software, is structured around two main axes: i) Leadership and resource management for inclusion; and ii) The contribution of ESEP to educational practice and organisational improvement. The findings reveal partial incorporation of IGEC recommendations and underscore the need for systematic follow-up by this body. Participants also emphasise the importance of continuous training, monitoring, and evaluation programmes targeted at school leadership as key conditions for ensuring the impact and sustainability of inclusive practices. Furthermore, the strategic role of leadership in enacting inclusive education principles and aligning with ESEP objectives is reinforced. This study contributes to a critical reflection on the potential of External School Evaluation as a tool for promoting the continuous improvement of inclusive educational practices.

Keywords: school evaluation; inspection; inclusive practices; school leadership; portugal