

BUILDING INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CULTURES THROUGH MULTILEVEL INTEGRATION STRATEGIES FOR MIGRANT STUDENTS IN PORTUGAL

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Abstract

The growing cultural and linguistic diversity in Portuguese public schools, driven by global migratory flows, poses complex educational challenges and requires responses that transcend administrative inclusion to promote genuinely transformative integration. This study presents the results of a nationwide qualitative investigation carried out under the project *AquiMeEncontro*, coordinated by Universidade Aberta in partnership with the national education authorities. It aims to identify, analyse, and systematize educational practices that support the successful integration of migrant students in public education. Data were collected from 126 school clusters across five regions of Portugal during the 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 academic years, using a structured open-ended questionnaire administered to school leadership teams. The methodological approach is anchored in content analysis supported by MAXQDA software, integrating five analytical dimensions: (1) type of activity; (2) pedagogical and social objectives; (3) organisational structure and stakeholders; (4) perceived levels of efficacy; and (5) contextual variables, including regional diversity and student demographics. Practices were mapped along four main axes: curricular, socioemotional, intercultural, and socioeconomic. Notably, 63% of activities were non-curricular, while 86% were located within informal educational frameworks, many of them systemic and recurrent. Frequently reported practices included personalised mentoring, targeted language support in Portuguese as a Non-Native Language (PLNM), peer-to-peer tutoring, and intercultural events celebrating linguistic and cultural diversity. The findings suggest that schools prioritise emotional well-being, initial reception, and language acquisition as core components of their integration strategies. Teachers and school leaders were identified as the main promoters (42%), while multidisciplinary teams, students, technical staff, and external partners also played relevant roles. Outcomes perceived by schools included increased student engagement, improved academic results, enhanced linguistic proficiency, and greater self-esteem and belonging among migrant learners. However, structural limitations persist. These include a lack of systematic teacher training in intercultural competences, the underrepresentation of migrant families in school governance processes, and the absence of formal evaluation mechanisms to monitor and sustain inclusive initiatives. The study concludes that while Portuguese schools are actively building inclusive ecosystems through multilevel and context-sensitive strategies, a second generation of policy and practice is required. This should focus on sustainable professional development, structured assessment tools, and co-responsibility frameworks that engage families and communities in meaningful ways. These insights are particularly relevant for informing international educational agendas, reinforcing institutional resilience, and advancing equity-driven reform in multicultural school systems.

Keywords: Inclusive education, migrant students, intercultural practices, school integration.

1 INTRODUCTION

European education systems have undergone profound demographic changes in the past two decades, shaped by global migration flows, increased mobility, and accelerating globalisation. Portugal, traditionally a country of emigration, has now become a host destination. Between 2018/19 and 2022/23, the number of pupils with foreign-born parents enrolled in Portuguese schools more than doubled, rising from approximately 53,000 to over 140,000 – an increase of 160% in just five years [1], [2]. In certain municipalities, such as Sintra, Amadora, Braga, and Porto, international students already represent between 30–40% of school populations [2]. These developments are not episodic but mark a structural transformation of the Portuguese education system. Yet this demographic diversification has not been matched by a coherent and comprehensive national strategy for migrant integration. While the Portuguese Constitution guarantees compulsory schooling until the age of 18 and Decree-Law No. 54/2018 establishes the overarching framework for inclusive education, subsequent legislative developments – notably Decree-Law No. 7/2025 and the revised conditions for Portuguese as a Non-Native Language (PLNM) – explicitly devolve to schools the responsibility for designing and enacting

concrete measures of support for international students [3]. In practice, policies have largely focused on enrolment and the provision of Portuguese as a Non-Native Language (PLNM), without embedding such measures into a broader integrative logic that connects language acquisition to socioemotional support, intercultural engagement, and equitable learning opportunities [4]. International research warns of the consequences of insufficient integration: migrant children experience grade retention rates up to four times higher than native-born peers [5], while also facing persistent language barriers, social exclusion, and higher risks of early school leaving [6]. These outcomes not only waste individual potential but also undermine social cohesion and economic development. For an ageing country with declining fertility rates, Portugal cannot afford such systemic inefficiencies. Turning diversity into a resource is therefore not only an educational challenge but a strategic question of national sustainability. Within this context, Portuguese schools occupy a frontline position. Promising initiatives have been reported in the media at the local level, yet they remain unevenly distributed, contingent on local resources and often reliant on temporary funding [7]. Consequently, integration opportunities vary considerably between territories, with urban schools in Lisbon or the Algarve able to mobilise more robust practices than rural schools with limited institutional capacity. This territorial inequality undermines the principle of equity that lies at the heart of inclusive education. The Portuguese case mirrors broader European debates. UNESCO's *Global Education Monitoring Report* [8] and OECD analyses [1] highlight how migration reshapes education systems, demanding policies that balance diversity with cohesion. Scholars such as Banks [9], Cummins [10], and Berry [11] emphasise that inclusive schooling requires going beyond assimilation or superficial multiculturalism. Instead, schools must become inclusive ecosystems, where linguistic support, socioemotional well-being, intercultural recognition, and democratic participation are interwoven into everyday life. Against this background, the project *AquiMeEncontro* was designed to provide an evidence base for integration practices in Portuguese schools. Coordinated by Universidade Aberta in partnership with the Directorate-General for Education, the study mapped pedagogical strategies across 126 school clusters during 2022/23 and 2023/24. It identified innovative practices, analysed their perceived impacts, and explored how schools adapt to increasingly plural student populations. By focusing on the micro-level of school practice while acknowledging macro- and meso-level policy contexts, the project contributes to international debates on building inclusive school cultures through multilevel integration strategies. This paper examines the types of practices reported, their objectives, the stakeholders involved, and the outcomes perceived by schools. It also discusses limitations and implications for future policy, emphasising that Portuguese schools are actively constructing inclusive cultures but require sustained systemic support to ensure continuity, equity, and transformative impact.

2 METHODOLOGY

The project was designed as a nationwide qualitative study to capture, document, and systematize practices implemented by Portuguese schools in response to increasing cultural and linguistic diversity. The methodology combined extensive data collection with systematic analysis, guided by principles of rigor, transparency, and contextual sensitivity.

2.1 Research design

The research adopted a qualitative exploratory design anchored in content analysis. This approach was considered particularly appropriate given the study's central aim: to reveal how schools themselves perceive, describe, and evaluate their happy integration practices. Rather than imposing predefined categories, the design allowed practices to be analysed inductively while also being situated within existing theoretical frameworks on inclusive education and intercultural integration. The project combined two levels of analysis. At the extensive level, a structured questionnaire was distributed to all public-school clusters in mainland Portugal, targeting leadership teams. At the intensive level, a set of 13 case studies was carried out in selected schools in order to examine in greater detail specific practices considered exemplary or innovative [24]. This paper focuses on the extensive component, drawing primarily on the corpus of 126 questionnaire responses received.

2.2 Participants

Out of a universe of 811 school clusters contacted, 126 responses were obtained, corresponding to a response rate of 15.5%. While modest, this rate provided sufficient geographical and demographic coverage to allow comparative analysis. Respondents were distributed across all five administrative regions: North (46), Lisbon and Tagus Valley (42), Centre (23), Alentejo (12), and Algarve (3). The presence of international students varied considerably across schools. Some reported less than 7% of

pupils with foreign nationality, whereas in others this proportion exceeded 40%. Such variation created the opportunity to compare practices in contexts of low and high diversity, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how demographic realities shape school responses [6]

2.3 Data collection, instruments and data analysis

Data collection relied on a structured, open-ended questionnaire specifically designed for the *AquiMeEncontro* project. Open-ended formats were considered particularly suitable for capturing the complexity of institutional practices and allowing respondents to provide rich descriptions in their own words [16], [17]. The instrument, validated by the Directorate-General for Education, was directed at school boards and leadership teams, who occupy a pivotal position in orchestrating institutional responses to diversity and inclusion. Each school was invited to describe up to two activities undertaken during the academic years 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 that they perceived as both innovative and effective. Respondents were asked to identify the pedagogical or social objectives pursued, to outline the modalities of implementation, to indicate the stakeholders involved and their respective roles, and to assess the perceived outcomes. In line with established practices in qualitative research, this procedure generated a corpus of narratives that combined factual reporting with evaluative judgements, thereby offering insights not only into the actions undertaken but also into the meanings attributed to them [18], [19]. All responses were collated and entered a consolidated database. Duplicated entries were removed to ensure the uniqueness of institutional observations, while supplementary administrative data from the Directorate-General of Statistics of Education and Science were integrated to provide contextual information on enrolment figures, the proportion of international pupils, and territorial location. This enriched dataset was then imported into MAXQDA, a widely used software for qualitative data management, which enhances the transparency and rigour of coding and retrieval processes [20]. The analytical process unfolded in successive stages. First, an iterative reading of the corpus enabled the identification of recurrent themes and the construction of a preliminary coding tree. Content analysis was conducted in accordance with established methodological guidelines [21], [19], combining categories informed by the literature – such as socioemotional support, linguistic development, intercultural recognition, and governance – with new categories emerging inductively from the data. The coding tree was subsequently refined and applied systematically across the dataset to ensure internal consistency while maintaining openness to emergent subcategories. Alongside qualitative interpretation, frequency counts were used to identify dominant patterns, and co-occurrence analysis allowed for the exploration of relationships between dimensions, such as the association between reception practices and reported socioemotional gains. Comparative analyses were also undertaken, contrasting schools with high and low proportions of international students, as well as schools in different regions, thus enabling sensitivity to context and variation [22]. The methodological stance was therefore both descriptive and interpretive: descriptive in its systematic mapping of the practices implemented, and interpretive in situating those practices within wider theoretical and policy debates on inclusion and equity in education [23], [24].

2.4 Ethical considerations

The study complied with national and international ethical standards for educational research [25], [26]. It was conducted under the auspices of Universidade Aberta, formally approved by the Directorate-General for Education and funded by the FCT (Science4Policy 2023 programme). Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, guaranteeing confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time. For minors, consent was additionally obtained from parents or guardians. Data were collected exclusively from institutional representatives, thus avoiding direct risks for pupils or vulnerable participants. In line with best practice in qualitative inquiry [24], [27], the research team adopted a reflexive stance, acknowledging the interpretive nature of self-reported data and addressing potential biases. This reinforced the transparency, credibility, and trustworthiness of the findings [28].

3 RESULTS

This section presents empirical findings while sitting within the broader literature on inclusive education and intercultural integration. Data from the 126 participating school clusters are organized across four analytical dimensions: the nature of activities, their stated objectives, the stakeholders involved, and the outcomes perceived. Each subsection integrates statistical evidence with critical discussion, thereby highlighting both the scope of current practices and their underlying limitations

3.1 Integration domains and curricular positioning

A total of 216 activities were reported. Of these, 63% were classified as non-curricular, while only 37% were curricular. Among curricular practices, a large majority (86%) belonged to the informal curriculum, with only 14% integrated into formal curricular structures. Most initiatives were non-curricular, often embedded in informal school life. Within informal practices, 72% were systemic (recurrent and structured), while 28% were occasional. This data reveals an important pattern: schools appear to rely predominantly on informal and non-curricular mechanisms for migrant integration. While this demonstrates institutional creativity and adaptability, it also suggests a lack of systemic embedding of inclusion into formal curricula. According to Krippendorff [21] and Schreier [19], such reliance on informal structures may limit sustainability, as practices remain vulnerable to discontinuity when reliant on individual initiative or project-based funding. International comparisons confirm this risk: OECD [1] and UNESCO [8] reports underline that integration becomes more equitable when embedded into structured curricular frameworks rather than confined to extra-curricular initiatives.

3.2 Objectives and strategic priorities

The analysis of objectives sheds light on the pedagogical, social, and cultural intentions underlying the practices implemented by Portuguese schools to integrate international students. Far from being random or isolated, these objectives reflect institutional priorities and reveal the dimensions in which schools invest most effort, as well as those that remain underdeveloped.

Table 1. Reported objectives of integration activities

<i>Objective</i>	<i>% of references</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
Socioemotional well-being	21%	Emphasis on creating safe, affective, and supportive environments as preconditions for learning and integration.
Initial reception and orientation	14%	Focus on the earliest stages of school entry, with strategies of welcome, guidance, and adaptation.
PLNM (linguistic development)	11%	Recognition of Portuguese language proficiency as foundational for academic success and participation.
Parental and community involvement	10%	Increasing recognition of the need to strengthen school–family–community partnerships.
Citizenship and democratic values	9%	Integration of intercultural and civic education to foster participation and democratic coexistence.
Cultural identity valorisation	8%	Promotion of diversity through cultural events, heritage projects, and identity recognition.
Mentoring and peer support	7%	Development of support networks that facilitate inclusion and belonging.
Academic and school guidance	7%	Orientation and tutoring to support students' educational trajectories.
Logistical and administrative support	6%	Provision of practical assistance to facilitate adaptation to the school environment.
Teacher training	1%	Very limited investment in professional capacity-building for intercultural competence.

The predominance of socioemotional well-being (21%) as the primary objective reveals a strong concern with establishing safe and supportive environments. This reflects international evidence that belonging and emotional security are indispensable conditions for successful integration ([1]; [8]). Cummins [10] further argues that academic success for migrant learners is contingent upon the dual development of cognitive and affective dimensions, reinforcing the centrality of socioemotional objectives in the schools' responses. The second most frequent goal, initial reception and orientation (14%), highlights the importance of the first contact between students and schools. Practices such as welcome sessions and reception classes are considered critical to building trust and mitigating anxieties during the early stages of adaptation. Berry's [11] acculturation framework supports this emphasis, demonstrating that early reception policies strongly influence whether integration is experienced as assimilation, marginalisation, or true bicultural inclusion. Language acquisition, captured under PLNM development (11%), was also prioritised. This indicates schools' recognition of linguistic proficiency not only as an academic tool but also as a symbolic resource for participation in the wider school community. Banks [9] stresses that without linguistic access, students risk exclusion from both learning and civic participation, making language a linchpin of inclusive

education. Parental and community involvement (10%) and citizenship education (9%) represent significant but secondary objectives. Their presence shows schools' increasing awareness of the importance of intercultural education and co-responsibility in the integration process. Yet, the relatively modest percentages also expose a structural gap: while families are rhetorically valued, their effective participation remains underdeveloped, echoing wider European findings about the difficulty of establishing authentic partnerships with migrant parents ([9]). Lower frequencies were recorded for identity valorisation (8%), mentoring and peer support (7%), academic guidance (7%), and logistical support (6%). These objectives, although present, are often treated as complementary rather than central, despite their potential to reinforce long-term integration. Particularly notable is the minimal attention given to teacher training (1%), which represents a critical structural weakness. As Biasutti, Concina and Frate [4] demonstrate, sustained professional development in intercultural pedagogy is a prerequisite for effective inclusion. Without systematic investment in teacher training, the sustainability and scalability of promising practices are likely to remain limited. Taken together, the findings reveal that Portuguese schools are guided by a predominantly humanistic and relational approach to integration, privileging well-being, reception, and language support. However, the relative neglect of teacher professionalisation and institutional structures suggests that while schools are proactive in addressing immediate needs, they remain underprepared to consolidate these efforts within a long-term, systemic framework.

3.3 Actors and governance models

The identification of the actors promoting integration activities provides essential insights into the collaborative nature – or lack thereof – of school responses to diversity. The analysis reveals a wide range of stakeholders engaged in the design, implementation, and monitoring of initiatives, reflecting both intra-school dynamics and inter-institutional collaboration. However, the distribution of responsibilities also exposes structural asymmetries that influence the depth and sustainability of inclusion processes.

Table 2. Stakeholders involved in integration activities

<i>Stakeholder group</i>	<i>% of references</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
Teachers	26%	Central drivers of initiatives, responsible for pedagogical planning and daily mediation of integration processes.
School leadership teams	16%	Strategic actors, shaping institutional culture and providing organisational support for inclusion.
Students (peer tutors, etc.)	15%	Active participants in peer mentoring and reception activities, signalling a culture of co-responsibility.
Specialised professionals (psychologists, mediators, therapists)	8%	Provide targeted expertise for addressing linguistic, emotional, and intercultural needs.
Multidisciplinary teams	7%	Illustrate collaborative approaches and inter-professional support within schools.
External partners (municipalities, NGOs, associations)	6%	Evidence of inter-institutional networks and territorialised responses.
Families/parents	5%	Marginal presence, often confined to indirect participation in school life.
Community volunteers	3%	Sporadic involvement, primarily symbolic rather than systemic.
Administrative staff	2%	Limited recognition, despite their potential role in supporting reception processes.

Teachers emerged as the principal promoters (26%), confirming their pivotal role as both pedagogical planners and mediators of everyday educational interactions. This centrality is consistent with Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins [12], who argue that teachers are at the heart of distributed leadership in schools, shaping both instructional quality and the inclusiveness of school cultures. School leadership accounted for 16% of references, underscoring the strategic role of headteachers and coordinators in embedding inclusive principles within organisational structures. Their involvement aligns with research showing that effective school leadership is a key predictor of successful institutional responses to diversity ([12]; [1]). Interestingly, students themselves represented 15% of promoters, primarily through peer mentoring, tutoring, and reception activities. This highlights the potential of youth agency in shaping inclusive environments, confirming Banks' [9] notion that intercultural education is most effective when learners are active participants rather than passive recipients. Specialised professionals, including

psychologists, intercultural mediators, and therapists, accounted for 8%, reflecting the growing reliance on technical expertise to address socioemotional and intercultural challenges. Similarly, multidisciplinary teams (7%) illustrate the value of collaborative and inter-professional approaches in building comprehensive responses. Beyond the school walls, external partners (6%) such as municipalities, NGOs, and local associations were also identified, signalling the emergence of territorial networks of support. This finding is consistent with Benediktsson and Tavares [9], who highlight that authentic collaboration between schools and external actors is essential for sustained inclusion. By contrast, families (5%) and community volunteers (3%) remain marginally involved. This is particularly concerning, as research emphasises that meaningful parental engagement enhances both academic achievement and social cohesion ([9]; [13]). The low percentages suggest that although schools recognise the relevance of family participation in principle, structural mechanisms to facilitate such involvement are underdeveloped. Administrative staff were mentioned in only 2% of cases, indicating that their potential contribution to reception and logistical support remains largely invisible. These findings suggest a governance model that is school-centred, with teachers and leaders assuming the bulk of responsibility, complemented by selective involvement of students and professionals. While this configuration demonstrates institutional mobilisation, the limited role of families, communities, and support staff exposes fragilities in the co-responsibility model advocated by UNESCO [8] and the OECD [1]. For integration to be sustainable, schools must move beyond internally driven responses towards broader, systemic partnerships that embed inclusion across multiple levels of governance.

3.4 Perceived efficacy and educational impacts

The analysis of perceived efficacy sought to capture not only measurable results but also subjective indicators of inclusion, belonging, and well-being as reported by school communities. This dimension is particularly relevant because integration is understood by schools as a process that transcends academic performance, encompassing social acceptance, emotional security, and recognition of identity.

Table 3. Reported indicators of efficacy of integration practices

<i>Indicator of efficacy</i>	<i>% of references</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
Successful school integration	17%	School's view efficacy primarily as ensuring that international students are fully integrated into daily academic and social routines.
Social inclusion and peer acceptance	14%	Highlights the relational dimension of integration and the importance of supportive peer networks.
Active participation in school life	11%	Reflects pupils' appropriation of school spaces and involvement in initiatives beyond the classroom.
Family satisfaction and engagement	9%	Suggests strengthened relationships between schools, students, and families, reinforcing trust and collaboration.
Linguistic development (PLNM)	8%	Underlines the instrumental and symbolic value of language acquisition for curricular access and participation.
Sense of belonging and identity	8%	Demonstrates the role of intercultural recognition and emotional security in fostering resilience.
Self-esteem and identity valorisation	7%	Indicates the affective dimension of integration, closely tied to recognition of cultural heritage.
Academic improvement	7%	Suggests perceived progress in learning outcomes, although less emphasised than socioemotional factors.
Institutional evaluation mechanisms	7%	Points to awareness of the importance of internal monitoring and quality assurance.
External recognition (awards/labels)	1%	Symbolically important, validating practices through external certification and enhancing visibility.

As Table 3 shows, the most frequently cited indicator was successful school integration (17%), interpreted as the ability of schools to guarantee that international students are fully included in both academic and social routines. This was followed by peer acceptance (14%) and active participation (11%), confirming the emphasis schools place on the relational and participatory dimensions of integration. Such findings echo UNESCO's [8] claim that belonging and peer relationships are foundational for long-term educational success. Other indicators included family satisfaction (9%), linguistic development in PLNM (8%), and sense of belonging (8%), which demonstrate the

interconnection between home–school relations, communicative competence, and socioemotional well-being. Banks [9] stresses that the recognition of cultural identity is a prerequisite for both academic engagement and civic participation, and the present data reinforce this point, as schools clearly value identity affirmation (7%) and self-esteem (7%) as meaningful markers of success. Interestingly, academic achievement was reported by only 7% of schools, suggesting that integration is not primarily assessed through grades but through socioemotional and intercultural processes. This perspective is consistent with Cummins [10], who argued that cognitive progress depends on prior conditions of emotional security and linguistic scaffolding. A smaller but noteworthy proportion (1%) reported external recognition, such as national awards or quality labels (e.g. *Escola Amiga da Criança*, *Escolas Sensíveis ao Trauma*). While rare, these acknowledgements serve as mechanisms of external validation, reinforcing legitimacy and potentially inspiring replication in other contexts. Tracy [28] observes that such recognition can enhance institutional reputation and function as a multiplier effect by disseminating models of good practice. Conversely, critical references to difficulties were scarce (1%). This imbalance may reflect a bias towards highlighting positive outcomes while downplaying challenges, a tendency frequently observed in self-reported institutional accounts ([24]). It reinforces the argument advanced by Patton [16] and Krippendorff [21] that robust evaluation requires systematic monitoring frameworks capable of capturing both achievements and shortcomings. Overall, the findings suggest that Portuguese schools conceptualise integration efficacy primarily in relational and affective terms – inclusion in everyday routines, peer acceptance, and a sense of belonging – rather than in narrowly academic dimensions. This conception resonates with international scholarship emphasising the multidimensionality of migrant integration ([10]; [1]). It also reveals that schools value inclusion not only for its instrumental contribution to learning but also for its transformative role in fostering well-being, resilience, and intercultural citizenship.

3.5 Contextual variations and structural challenges

A comparative analysis reveals significant differences between schools with high and low proportions of international students. In contexts with greater diversity ($\geq 28\%$), schools invested more heavily in PLNМ classes, mentoring programmes, and structured reception activities. Conversely, schools with limited diversity ($\leq 7\%$) tended to rely on symbolic cultural events and one-off celebrations. This pattern confirms Berry's [11] proposition that demographic context shapes the strategies adopted by host institutions. Despite the diversity of initiatives, three persistent structural challenges emerged. First, the scarcity of systematic teacher training limits the professional capacity to respond to complex intercultural realities [4], [14]. Second, evaluation mechanisms are largely absent, making it difficult to measure impact or replicate successful practices [15], [28]. Third, family participation remains peripheral, contradicting evidence that meaningful engagement of migrant parents is a key determinant of success [9]. Together, these limitations point to the need for a “second generation” of integration policies that move beyond ad hoc initiatives towards sustainable, systemic approaches. The findings demonstrate that Portuguese schools are actively building inclusive cultures through multilevel strategies that combine curricular adaptations, socioemotional support, and intercultural recognition. The emphasis on emotional well-being and language support reflects international consensus on the foundations of integration, while the creativity of informal practices shows institutional adaptability. Yet, the absence of systemic embedding into curricula, limited professional development, weak evaluation frameworks, and insufficient family involvement remain critical gaps. As such, Portuguese schools are progressing towards inclusion, but they require stronger policy frameworks, continuous investment, and mechanisms of accountability to transform diversity from a challenge into a driver of innovation and equity.

4 CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Practical implications

The results of the *AquiMeEncontro* project illustrate that Portuguese schools, while operating within an incomplete national framework for migrant inclusion, are already enacting complex and multilevel strategies that bear significant implications for practice and policy. The evidence shows that integration is not conceptualised merely as administrative enrolment but rather as a multidimensional process where linguistic, socioemotional, intercultural, and organisational dimensions intersect. A first implication concerns the primacy of socioemotional well-being and linguistic development. The centrality of these objectives reflects an understanding that belonging and communicative competence are interdependent preconditions for academic achievement. Cummins [10] has long argued that without linguistic scaffolding, migrant learners are structurally disadvantaged, while Banks [9] emphasises that the

absence of recognition of cultural identities undermines both engagement and equity. The convergence of socioemotional support and PLNM instruction in Portuguese schools therefore resonates with the literature on culturally responsive pedagogy, confirming that integration requires simultaneous attention to cognitive and affective domains. A second implication relates to the prevalence of systemic yet informal practices. These initiatives, ranging from mentoring to intercultural events, demonstrate institutional resilience and creativity. Yet, their reliance on informal curricular spaces raises concerns about sustainability, as inclusion remains at risk of being fragmented or episodic ([21]; [22]). UNESCO [8] insists that integration should be embedded into the formal curriculum in order to guarantee continuity and legitimacy. For Portugal, this means moving from ad hoc initiatives towards structural curricular frameworks that normalise diversity as a constitutive principle of schooling. A third implication emerges from the asymmetry of governance and participation. Teachers and leaders account for most initiative drivers, while families and communities remain marginal. This configuration reflects what Leithwood et al. [12] describe as distributed leadership within the professional sphere, but without extending it to parents or local stakeholders. Research on school–family partnerships ([9]) underscores that the absence of migrant families from governance processes risks reproducing exclusion at the institutional level. Strengthening mechanisms of co-responsibility – through participatory councils, multilingual reception handbooks, or joint intercultural projects – is therefore essential to advance inclusivity from discourse to practice. Finally, the study reveals the urgent need to invest in professional development. The almost negligible presence of teacher training initiatives (1%) indicates a structural weakness. As Biasutti et al. [4] demonstrate, without systematic preparation in intercultural competences, educators are constrained in their ability to enact responsive pedagogies. Embedding intercultural education into teacher education and ensuring continuous professional learning are thus indispensable for consolidating inclusive school cultures. The practical implications are clear: to transform promising but fragile initiatives into enduring practices, inclusion must be integrated into the formal curriculum, teacher education, and participatory governance, supported by coherent national frameworks.

4.2 Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

Although this study maps migrant integration practices in Portuguese schools, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Recognising these is crucial for assessing the robustness of the findings and charting directions for future research. The first limitation is the restricted response rate (15.5%). While geographically diverse, the sample may be biased towards schools already engaged with issues of diversity. As Bryman [23] reminds us, voluntary participation in social research is often selective, leading to over-representation of more proactive institutions. Caution is therefore required when generalising findings to the entire system. The second limitation lies in the nature of the data, which are self-reported by school leadership teams. This creates a risk of institutional self-presentation, privileging optimistic accounts of success over accounts of failure or tension. Lincoln and Guba [24] stress that trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry requires triangulation and the inclusion of multiple voices. Future research should therefore expand the range of informants to include students, migrant families, and frontline teachers, in order to capture a fuller spectrum of experiences. A third limitation concerns the absence of longitudinal evidence. The practices reported refer to activities undertaken in 2022/2023 and 2023/2024, offering only a snapshot in time. Without longitudinal follow-up, it is impossible to assess whether such practices evolve into sustained organisational change or whether their effects dissipate. Patton [16] and Miles et al. [22] argue that evaluation of educational interventions requires temporal depth to capture processes of institutionalisation. Future studies should therefore adopt longitudinal or mixed methods designs to assess durability and impact over time. Finally, the study draws attention to the lack of systematic evaluation frameworks within schools themselves. While most respondents reported perceiving their initiatives as effective, such judgements remain subjective in the absence of structured monitoring tools. Tracy [28] has argued that excellence in qualitative research depends not only on thick description but also on transparent criteria of evaluation. Developing assessment frameworks that integrate both quantitative indicators (academic results, retention rates) and qualitative measures (sense of belonging, intercultural recognition) should therefore be a priority for future research and policy development. Considering these limitations, future inquiry should move in three directions: broadening participation to include underrepresented voices, deepening temporal analysis through longitudinal studies, and strengthening evaluation through the development of robust and multidimensional monitoring instruments. Such advances would not only refine the empirical evidence base but also contribute to the institutionalisation of inclusive practices in Portugal and beyond.

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