

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ACTION: A CASE STUDY OF IMMIGRANT STUDENT INTEGRATION IN A PORTUGUESE SCHOOL

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Abstract

This study is part of the *AquiMeEncontro* project, authorized by the Directorate-General for Education under the *Science4Policy 2023* initiative (Portugal), and focuses on the experience of Class E at the Madalena School Cluster (Vila Nova de Gaia), composed predominantly of immigrant students. The main objective of the research is to understand the impact of creating this class as an integration strategy, identifying the factors that contributed to its success.

The methodological approach adopted was qualitative, with the case study as the main research strategy. Several data collection procedures were carried out: individual interviews (with the school leadership and the class director teacher), focus groups with teachers, students, and parents, and document analysis of three institutional tools — the Educational Project 2022–2026, Learning and Inclusion – Measures and Resources, and the Welcome Guide for Migrant Students (July 2024). This triangulation enabled a deeper understanding of how the school developed a contextualized and structured response to growing linguistic and cultural diversity.

The results show that Class E is a practice that effectively promoted the inclusion, well-being, and academic success of immigrant students. The document analysis reveals a progressive institutional commitment to inclusive education, particularly in terms of operationalizing and creating specific tools such as the welcome guide. The experience demonstrates that effective integration depends on the articulation of individualized diagnosis, language teaching (Portuguese as a non-native language), valuing students' native languages and cultures, and active engagement of the educational community. At the same time, some concerns regarding the broader integration of students in the school and the community were raised and discussed.

This study reinforces the role of schools as spaces of welcome, equity, and belonging, and highlights for more effective public policies that aim to integrate immigrant students.

Keywords: Inclusive education, immigrant students, school integration, Portugal.

1 INTRODUCTION

The growing scale of global migration has reshaped the demographic composition of schools worldwide, placing new demands on education systems. In Portugal, as in many other European countries, the arrival of immigrant students with diverse linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds challenges schools to design inclusive responses that ensure equitable access to learning. These students often face multiple barriers: lack of proficiency in Portuguese, limited familiarity with local educational practices, and difficulties navigating cultural expectations.

Within this scenario, schools are not only learning spaces but also sites of reception, belonging, and social participation. They play a central role in guaranteeing immigrant students' right to education and in building inclusive environments where diversity is recognized as a resource rather than an obstacle.

However, ensuring genuine integration involves more than language acquisition; it requires holistic strategies that address academic, social, cultural, and emotional dimensions ([1], [2]). Research has consistently highlighted key challenges in this process, such as language barriers that hinder access to the curriculum ([3], [4], [5]), cultural dissonances in school norms ([2]), and the lack of teacher preparedness in intercultural pedagogy ([6]).

In response to these challenges, some studies have shown the effectiveness of school reception programs in supporting immigrant students' integration. Initiatives like reception classes—typically composed of recently arrived students—and the systematic teaching of the host country's language can promote not only academic learning but also a crucial sense of belonging ([7], [8]). While the literature identifies several advantages, such as the creation of a safe environment, more effective language learning, and the recognition of specific needs, researchers also warn of potential risks. These include

social isolation, segregation, and poorly planned transitions into mainstream classes, which may compromise educational inclusion and hinder long-term academic progress ([8]).

Considering these opportunities and dilemmas, this paper presents a detailed case study of Class E, a reception class created in the Madalena School Cluster in Gaia, Portugal. This initiative was designed to support the academic adaptation and social integration of recently arrived immigrant students by combining Portuguese as a Non-Native Language (PNNL) instruction with tailored pedagogical strategies and strong community involvement. The case provides an opportunity to examine how institutional initiatives can foster inclusion while mitigating the risks of segregation. Based on this focus, three main research objectives were established:

- 1 To understand the rationale and process behind the creation of Class E, examining the motivations, institutional decisions, and challenges encountered in its implementation.
- 2 To analyse the impacts of Class E on immigrant students' academic performance, social integration, and well-being, assessing how the initiative contributed to their adaptation and educational success.
- 3 To identify the factors that contributed to the effectiveness of Class E, highlighting the pedagogical, institutional, and relational elements that supported its success and may inform practices in other multicultural school contexts.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design and Case Selection

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach ([9]) to explore the experience of Class E, a reception class at the Madalena School Cluster in Gaia, Portugal. This research design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth, contextualized analysis of the complex strategies, processes, and impacts associated with the integration of immigrant students. Class E was selected as a purposive sample due to its unique characteristics as a structured institutional response, established in the 2022/2023 school year, to address the arrival of a significant number of immigrant students with a clear aim of facilitating adaptation and inclusion.

2.2 Participants

The study involved a purposeful sample of multiple stakeholders from the school community to ensure a comprehensive perspective. Participants included the school principal, the class head teacher, two subject teachers, eight immigrant students (four girls and four boys from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds), and two parents/guardians. This diversity of participants enabled the collection of insights from leadership, teaching staff, students, and families.

2.3 Data Collection Instruments and Data Analysis

Three complementary methods were used to achieve triangulation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal and the class head teacher to explore motivations, strategies, and challenges. Additionally, focus groups were held with teachers, students, and parents to capture their experiences, perceptions, and representations of Class E. Document analysis was also performed on institutional materials, specifically the Educational Project 2022–2026, the document “Learning and Inclusion: Measures and Resources,” and the Migrant Student Welcome Manual (July 2024). The qualitative data were systematically coded and analysed using MaxQDA software, enabling the identification of categories aligned with the study's objectives.

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2.4 Ethical considerations

The research complied with ethical standards for educational studies. Formal authorization was obtained from the school cluster. The study was carried out within the scope of the *AquiMeEncontro* project, approved by the Portuguese Directorate-General for Education and funded by the FCT (Science4Policy 2023 program). Participants signed an informed consent form, ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. In the case of minors, consent was obtained from their parents/guardians.

3 RESULTS

The results are organized according to the research objectives.

3.1 Presentation of the Case

The Madalena School Cluster (AEM), inaugurated in 2001, comprises four kindergartens, three primary schools, and one lower secondary school, serving approximately 1,000 students. Its educational community is supported by 78 teachers and 75 non-teaching staff, ensuring a comprehensive and diversified response to student needs.

In recent years, the cluster has experienced a marked increase in students from diverse countries, including some from contexts of armed conflict or socio-economic disadvantage. In response, Class E was established as a tailored initiative to support the phased and closely monitored adaptation of immigrant students to the national curriculum. The class aimed to facilitate Portuguese language learning, familiarization with school routines and spaces, and both social and academic integration.

This initiative reflects AEM's strong commitment to inclusive education. The school mobilized its Reception Team and the Multidisciplinary Team for Support for Inclusive Education to assess individual needs, design personalized interventions, and monitor students' progress. Key pillars of this model included targeted support in Portuguese as a Non-Native Language (PNNL), peer mentoring, active family involvement, and cooperation with external institutions.

The case of Class E thus provides a concrete example of how a public school can intentionally organize itself to address the challenges of immigration and cultural diversity. At a strategic level, AEM embraces an inclusive and plural vision in its Educational Project, positioning the school as a space of equity, respect for diversity, and promotion of academic success for all students, regardless of origin or personal circumstances.

3.2 Rationale and Challenges

Class E was created in the 2022/2023 school year in response to a sharp rise in immigrant enrolments. The measure sought to provide a structured and supportive environment where newly arrived students could gradually adapt to the Portuguese curriculum.

The initiative, however, faced several challenges. Concerns were raised that grouping immigrant students together might be perceived as discriminatory. Choosing teachers with the right balance of intercultural sensitivity and pedagogical flexibility was another key issue. Communication with families also proved essential, both to explain the project's aims and to guarantee voluntary participation. Finally, cultural differences in classroom behaviour sometimes created tension and required ongoing negotiation between teachers and students.

3.3 Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

To address these difficulties, the school implemented a set of targeted strategies. Families were involved from the outset through transparent communication that clarified the pedagogical purpose of the class. Teachers adopted differentiated approaches, such as simplifying language, repeating instructions, and allowing extra time for tasks.

A cornerstone of the initiative was Portuguese as a Non-Native Language (PNNL) instruction. Students were assessed through initial proficiency tests and grouped accordingly for tailored language support, enabling faster progress. Peer mentoring and extracurricular activities further encouraged participation and intercultural exchange, helping to strengthen students' sense of belonging.

Together, these strategies ensured that Class E was not seen as a segregating measure but as an inclusive pathway towards integration.

3.4 Impacts of Class E

The analysis revealed clear benefits across academic, social, and emotional dimensions.

- 1 Academic performance: Students quickly improved their Portuguese proficiency and gained access to the national curriculum. Within two years, several had achieved top grades and been included in the school's honor roll.

- 2 Social integration: Pupils reported feeling welcomed by classmates, making friends, and actively participating in school life. Parents also noted smoother adaptation and stronger engagement with the school.
- 3 Well-being: Teachers and families observed gains in confidence, maturity, and emotional stability. The fact that no families requested transfers to other classes was viewed as a strong sign of satisfaction.

These outcomes confirm the value of creating a safe, supportive, and culturally responsive learning environment for immigrant students.

3.5 Success Factors

The success of Class E was the result of a combination of interrelated factors rather than a single measure. Above all, the leadership and dedication of the class head teacher emerged as a central element, ensuring close relationships with students, parents, and colleagues, as well as effective mediation in moments of conflict or uncertainty.

Equally important was the collaboration among teachers and the school psychologist, who worked together to adapt methodologies, monitor student progress, and provide emotional support. This teamwork allowed the school to respond flexibly to the diverse needs of immigrant students.

Parental involvement also played a decisive role. Families placed their trust in the school, actively participated in meetings, and supported their children's integration, reinforcing a climate of cooperation between home and school.

The school's institutional commitment provided a strong foundation for the initiative. Tools such as the Migrant Student Welcome Manual and the support of the Inclusive Education Team (EMAEI) gave consistency to practices and ensured alignment with the broader vision of inclusive education.

Finally, the relatively small size of Class E allowed teachers to provide personalized attention, strengthen relationships, and create a safe and stable environment that supported both academic learning and emotional well-being.

Together, these factors demonstrate that the effectiveness of reception classes depends not only on their structure but also on the quality of leadership, collaboration, and trust built across the entire educational community.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The case study of Class E demonstrates that reception classes, when carefully planned and implemented, can be an effective strategy for fostering the academic success, social integration, and well-being of immigrant students. The initiative at the Madalena School Cluster not only promoted Portuguese language acquisition but also created a safe and supportive environment that enabled students to feel welcomed and valued.

These findings resonate with previous research stressing the importance of language support and structured reception programs in promoting immigrant students' adaptation ([7], [8]). Like the Norwegian experience of transitional reception classes (Rambøll, 2016, cited in [8]), Class E shows how temporary, focused measures can facilitate integration into mainstream education, provided that transitions are well planned and accompanied by institutional support.

At the same time, the study highlights that the success of such initiatives is not automatic. The risks identified in the literature—segregation, isolation, and delayed transitions ([8])—were acknowledged by participants and carefully mitigated through transparency with families, personalized pedagogical practices, and strong institutional commitment. This underscores the importance of intercultural teacher competences ([6]) and continuous dialogue with students and families as critical components of inclusive education.

Another key conclusion concerns the role of school leadership and collaboration. The findings confirm that the dedication of the class head teacher, the teamwork among teachers and the psychologist, and the active involvement of parents were decisive factors. This aligns with broader theoretical perspectives that conceive schools as communities of practice, where inclusion is built through cooperation, shared responsibility, and the recognition of diversity as a resource ([1], [2]).

Finally, the study reinforces that inclusive education cannot be reduced to linguistic support alone. Rather, it requires holistic and multi-level strategies that combine curricular adaptation, attention to emotional well-being, family engagement, and institutional policies aligned with equity and social justice ([3], [4], [5]).

In this sense, the case of Class E illustrates how a public school can intentionally organize itself to respond to the challenges of immigration and cultural diversity. It also offers valuable insights for educational policy, suggesting that reception classes can be powerful tools when embedded in an inclusive school culture, supported by appropriate resources, and oriented towards long-term integration rather than temporary segregation.

4.1 Practical Implications

The experience of Class E offers valuable lessons for schools and policymakers. First, it shows that reception classes can effectively support immigrant students' integration when embedded within a broader inclusive school culture. Practical measures such as transparent communication with families, systematic Portuguese as a Non-Native Language (PNNL) support, and active parental involvement proved decisive in building trust and fostering belonging. Second, the case highlights the need for professional development in intercultural pedagogy, ensuring that teachers are equipped to address linguistic and cultural diversity in everyday practice. Finally, the study suggests that small class sizes and collaborative structures, such as the Reception Team and Inclusive Education Team, are essential conditions that should be considered in the design of integration policies and school practices.

4.2 Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

This research has some limitations that must be acknowledged. As a single case study, the findings are context-specific and may not be directly generalizable to other schools or regions. The qualitative methodology, while offering depth, relies on the perspectives of a limited number of participants, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences among immigrant students and families. In addition, the study focused on the short - to medium - term impacts of Class E; further longitudinal research is needed to assess how students' integration evolves after their transition into mainstream classes. Future studies could also compare different models of reception and integration to better understand which conditions most effectively sustain inclusion over time.

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