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Strategic Action Plans for School Improvement: An Exploratory Study About Quality Indicators for School Improvement Plan Evaluation

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Abstract

School strategic planning and strategic action plans (SAPs) are considered relevant tools for school improvement. This study was conducted with the aim of identifying quality indicators for school SAPs and test their utility in the Portuguese context. By using a qualitative content analysis throughout diverse data sources (plans of Portuguese schools, national guidelines, and educational literature), a grid with quality indicators for school improvement plan analysis was designed. Nine quality indicators guided the analysis of 663 SAPs of Portuguese schools. Results indicated that plans lack relevant quality dimensions, which are more of a description or a list of actions than a tool that supports the strategic action of a given school. Notwithstanding, plans are aligned with national policies and provide meaningful and relevant information to guide plan implementation. The findings of this study are anticipated to derive implications for policies, practices, and research related to school improvement.

Keywords: *school improvement, strategic planning, quality indicators, qualitative study.*

Introduction

School improvement is a central aim of educational systems and a core concept in educational literature research (Hajisoteriou et al., 2018; Harris et al., 2015; Leithwood et al., 2006). A number of studies have affirmed strategic planning as a valuable tool for school improvement anchored in schools' vision and strategy (e.g., Mbugua & Rarieya, 2014; Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019).

The terms "strategy" and "strategic planning" are still being confused and largely perceived as synonymous (Eacott, 2008). Despite being related, strategy and strategic planning in schools are different concepts that must be acknowledged differently (Carvalho et al., 2021a; Davies, 2006; Eacott, 2008; Quong & Walker, 2010). Nowadays, the concept of strategy accentuates the need

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for a comprehensive and holistic perspective related to school planning. School strategy incorporates three core dimensions articulated with a schoolwide perspective: (i) vision, mission, and direction; (ii) intentional thinking; and (iii) articulated decision-making and action (Carvalho et al., 2021). Therefore, school strategic plans should be based on and derived from a coherent and comprehensive strategy for a specific school. The design and implementation of a plan are related and must be articulated and aligned with the school's global mission. The quality of a plan's implementation is related to the quality of the plan and planning process (Davies, 2006, 2007; Eacott, 2008, 2011; Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019).

High-quality planning process is believed to be a core dimension that supports a school's actions toward improvement as it directs schools, teams, and professionals to specific priorities, goals, and activities (Acton, 2021; Fernandez, 2011; Strunk et al., 2016). Furthermore, it reinforces stakeholders' compromise and involvement and facilitates reflection, capacity building, and professional and organizational development (Carvalho et al., 2021b; Fernandez, 2011).

Such arguments suggest that requiring schools to devise plans for school improvement would be uncontroversial. This idea is reinforced by school reforms worldwide that have mandated formal planning to foster improvement (e.g., Agi, 2017; Al-Zboon & Hasan, 2012; Schlebusch & Mokhatle, 2016). For example, in Portugal, like other countries, several educational reform policies have mandated formal planning for school improvement. Portuguese schools are asked to design strategic action plans (SAPs) on a regular basis to improve student success (Ministry of Education, 2016, 2018, 2020). As a result, school improvement plans are regarded as demand for improvement and a tool to guide the same.

Though schools' strategic plans have been adopted extensively, little evidence exists about emergent challenges related to school improvement planning (cf. Carvalho et al., 2021) and about plan quality concerning their processes and outcomes (e.g., Leithwood et al., 2006; Strunk et al., 2016), which is also true within the Portuguese educational system. Thus, some researchers have been critical of the notion that formal planning can produce considerable improvements in schools (Bell, 2002). Indeed, some studies have highlighted limitations or difficulties concomitant to school improvement planning, such as the inability to recognize plan value as a result of a top-down imposition to schools, teachers and administrators' overloading, or rigidity of plan prescriptions (Bell, 2002; Fernandez, 2011; Strunk et al., 2016).

Previous studies concerning school improvement planning have identified the prevalence of plans to accomplish externally driven requirements (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019) more than plans to intentionally support schools' mission, vision, and direction. Additionally, in terms of structure, improvement plans seem to be fairly similar, typically listing goals and strategies (Meyers & Hitt, 2018). Also, most plans are short-term oriented and based on the immediate needs of the school (Mbugua & Rarieya, 2014).

Moreover, school improvement planning is not always fully embraced, knowledge-based, and evidence-based, which has raised questions about schools' efficacy on strategic planning and action processes (Cheng, 2011; Fernandez, 2011; Schildkamp, 2019; Strunk et al., 2016; Wanjala & Rarieya, 2014). Some authors have argued that most stakeholders lack knowledge about strategic planning and implementation processes, debating about what should be known by the different stakeholders, what data are required to support planning and decision-making, and how to accomplish planning, implementation, and evaluation of school improvement plans (Acton, 2021; Fernandez, 2011; Schildkamp, 2019; Wanjala & Rarieya, 2014).

Therefore, it is urgent to shift from short-term, crisis-driven school improvement planning approaches to broader strategic processes (Davies, 2006), supported by an integrated and holistic appraisal of a school's strengths and weaknesses involving the entire school community (Cheng, 2010). In this regard, data-based processes are required to identify priorities for a specific school, to involve different stakeholders from the start by making sense of data, priorities, and strategy, and to support and validate decision-making (Acton, 2021; Schildkamp, 2019).

Considering all the above, school improvement planning does not completely assure school improvement or even strategic action, and it requires taking into account the quality of the plans. Thus, it is essential to deepen the knowledge about the planning and implementation of processes for high-quality school strategic plans.

Key known indicators of high-quality planning for school improvement can be derived from the extant educational literature (e.g., Acton, 2021; Carvalho et al., 2021b; Dunaway et al., 2012; Fernandez, 2011; Garcia & Cerado, 2020; Immordino et al., 2016; Meyer et al., 2020; Strunk et al., 2016). The comprehensive and integrated nature of the plans, their alignment with the school vision, mission, and priorities, the option for research-based strategies, a well-defined plan considering goals and implementation, a clear definition of a data-based and monitoring process, the community involvement, and the provision of professional development opportunities may be

regarded as relevant indicators for quality school plan evaluation (e.g., Acton, 2021; Dunaway et al., 2012; Fernandez, 2011; Immordino et al., 2016; Meyer et al., 2020; Strunk et al., 2016).

Some studies aimed to evaluate school plans in terms of quality by taking into account some of these specific indicators (e.g., Chukwumah, 2015; Domingo et al., 2020; Fernandez, 2011; Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019; Strunk et al., 2016). For instance, the findings of Fernandez's (2011) study evidenced a positive relationship between the quality of strategic planning and a school's academic performance and identified specific indicators for planning that have higher relevance in improvement (e.g., comprehensive and integrated nature of the plans, monitoring process). However, the author also acknowledged that contextual school factors mediate the impact of planning in academic performance and improvement (e.g., leadership and institutional dynamics; problems the school faces). Thus, planning may be argued to be relevant to school improvement, but it requires appraising the quality of the plans from a comprehensive and holistic perspective. Determining a plans' quality and the indicators that may guide the planning processes in schools is central. This study was conducted with the aim to identify adequate indicators to characterize SAPs in terms of quality in Portuguese schools.

Method

Data Context

The Portuguese educational reform agendas reflect the need for school improvement (Machado, 2017; OECD, 2020). The compulsory education expansion until 12 years of formal education and the maintained aim to improve students' academic success rates have compelled policies for alleviating and preventing students' academic challenges. Since the 1980s, the Portuguese government has mandated school programs for academic success, as is the case of The National Programme to Promote Educational Success (Programa Nacional de Promoção do Sucesso Escolar, PNPSE, 2016) launched in 2016 (OECD, 2020).

PNPSE is a comprehensive strategy to combat school failure and grade repetition with a strong emphasis on building capacity for teachers and school leaders (OECD, 2020). It is a strategy to support schools to develop improvement plans for their SAPs.

SAP can be defined as a tool to guide and structure school action to address its core problems by defining aims and priorities in a participative and constructive manner (Verdasca et al., 2019). For

SAP elaboration, Ministry of Education provided some guidelines, which account for three aspects: pedagogical (e.g., innovative pedagogical strategies, evaluation practices); organizational (e.g., collaborative practices); and format and content (problem identification, beneficiaries, practice identification/name, goals, targets, indicators, activities, timeline, professionals involved, additional resources and the need for professional development activities related to the project). Guidelines and support were also provided for the planning process in schools. A group of three people from each school received information and training during the planning process. Still, each school was instructed to ensure broad participation in SAP elaboration and its implementation and strong dissemination.

The SAPs were elaborated and approved for the first time in July 2016, and since September 2016, they have been implemented in 663 Portuguese schools (of 811 public schools existing in Portugal; Verdasca et al., 2019). In September 2018, SAPs were reformed for continuity, and in 2020, they were reformulated with regard to their priorities (OECD, 2020). Therefore, SAPs are considered instrumental in school action and improvement in Portugal.

Purpose and Research Questions

The quality of school improvement plans is a critical issue that requires due consideration of policymakers, practitioners, and researchers in education. This is particularly required in educational contexts (e.g., Portuguese) that usually mandate strategic action plan elaboration to support and guide schools' actions toward improvement. For this reason, it is important to analyze the characteristics of school improvement plans in Portuguese schools considering quality indicators.

The existence of school improvement plans does not guarantee schools improvement, nor does it mean that the school has a clear and intentional strategy articulated with a specific mission. Therefore, the quality of school improvement plans and of the planning process itself is a relevant issue to be addressed in educational research. As stated earlier, little evidence exists about actual challenges related to school planning (cf. Carvalho et al., 2021) and about plans' quality concerning their processes and outcomes (e.g., Leithwood et al., 2006; Strunk et al., 2016). Though some indicators of high-quality plans for school improvement can be derived from educational literature (e.g., Acton, 2021; Carvalho et al., 2021b; Dunaway et al., 2012; Fernandez, 2011; Garcia & Cerado, 2020; Immordino et al., 2016; Meyer et al., 2020; Strunk et al., 2016), agreement

on which indicators can be used to define high-quality SAPs is required to support planning processes as well as to evaluate the plans itself and their implementation.

As literature on school improvement plans' quality is scarce, this study aimed to identify what indicators can be used to evaluate school strategic action plans' quality and test these specific indicators in terms of utility in Portuguese schools' plans. Therefore, this qualitative study was conducted with the purpose of developing a set of indicators that can appraise the quality of SAPs designed for Portuguese schools. The aforementioned definition of SAPs given by Verdasca et al. (2019) has been used in this study. Quality indicators are generally used to identify core dimensions to accomplish when planning, implementing, and evaluating SAPs.

This study attempted to answer the following questions:

RQ1. What are the indicators that can be used to appraise the quality of SAPs of Portuguese schools?

RQ2. What are the main characteristics of the SAPs of Portuguese schools considering the quality indicators previously defined?

Data Collection and Analysis

This study was conducted using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014), which is defined as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 24). As the primary aim of this study was to define specific indicators from a set of relevant documents (e.g., literature, guidelines, recommendations, and school plans) and test their usage by analyzing another set of documents (school improvement plans), qualitative content analysis was considered appropriate.

According to Mayring (2014), there are three fundamental forms of interpretation in qualitative content analysis:

> Summary: The object of the analysis is to reduce the material in such a way that the essential contents remain, in order to create through abstraction a comprehensive overview of the base material which is nevertheless still an image of it.
>
> Explication: The object of the analysis is to provide additional material on individual doubtful text components (terms, sentences...) with a view to increasing understanding, explaining, interpreting the particular passage of text.

> Structuring: The object of the analysis is to filter out particular aspects of the material, to give a cross-section through the material according to pre-determined ordering criteria, or to assess the material according to certain criteria. (pp. 63–64)

In this study, qualitative content analysis by structuring was applied in two different phases of data analysis after data collection.

Data collection included (1) collecting relevant educational literature related to school planning and school evaluation, which already presented specific indicators, (2) collecting guidelines and recommendations for SAP issued by Portuguese Ministry of Education, and (3) collecting the total of 663 SAPs approved and implemented in 2016 in different Portuguese schools. For SAP collection, authorization for usage was obtained from the Ministry of Education representative of the respective program (PNPSE, 2016), and the SAPs were made available by this same representative. Even though SAPs are public and available on each school's website, this procedure is guaranteed to acknowledge ethical requests. After SAP collection, documents were prepared for analysis with NVivo 12 software. A code was attributed to each plan (corresponding number and type – measures adopted or results – as this example: 1_M).

During the first phase of data analysis, inductive analysis was performed to filter out particular aspects of the material, in this case, the quality indicators for SAP evaluation, which involved analyzing educational literature, Ministry of Education guidelines for SAP elaboration, and the total of 663 Portuguese schools SAP. A grid with quality indicators for schools' improvement plans analysis was designed in accordance with three different sources: (1) qualitative content analysis of school SAPs of Portuguese schools, (2) national guidelines of Portuguese Ministry of Education, and (3) educational literature devoted to school improvement and planning.

In the second phase, deductive analysis was conducted to assess the material according to certain criteria. The plans were analyzed considering quality indicators defined at the end of the first phase. Each quality indicator of the grid was used as a category for SAP analysis.

Findings

Based on the research questions and the analysis conducted, results were organized as follows: (1) quality indicators for school SAP evaluation (RQ1) and (2) evaluation of the Portuguese school SAPs (RQ2).

3.1. What are the indicators that can be used to evaluate the quality of SAPs of Portuguese schools?

From the inductive analysis, some common categories were identified as pertinent to quality indicator selection and preparation.

Generally, SAPs present a straightforward scanning of problems and resources and an intentional focus on priorities defined by the Ministry of Education (e.g., change school and classroom organization, improve teachers' collaboration, and reinforce supervision practices). The Ministry of Education in Portugal has provided some guidelines for schools to develop their SAPs regarding pedagogical priorities (e.g., innovative pedagogical strategies, evaluation practices) and organizational concerns (e.g., collaborative practices). Recommendations for the SAPs' format and content have also been provided (problem identification, beneficiaries, practice identification/name, goals, targets, indicators, activities, timeline, professionals involved, additional resources, and need for professional development activities related to the project). As expected, there is some convergence between SAP and part of the guidelines/recommendations provided.

From SAP analysis, four categories were identified: (1) school problems, (2) goals to accomplish, (3) activities proposed, and (4) SAP monitoring. It is worth noting that the categories identified are convergent with the guidelines issued by the Portuguese Ministry of Education.

Schools problems. This category corresponds to the aspects that must be changed or improved in each school. In SAPs, the problems most reported concerned students, school results, and teachers. Problems confronted by students are mostly related to learning disabilities, indiscipline, demotivation, and social condition. School results refer to academic results and social results. Problems faced by teachers are mainly related to lack of collaborative work, absence of supervision practices, and inadequate teaching practices.

Goals to accomplish. This category refers to the goals defined by schools to be achieved with implementation of SAPs. As problems reported, goals were also related to students, school results, and teachers. Considering students, goals to attain include academic improvement, higher motivation, and involvement. In regard to school results, goals are defined to improve academic and social results. Considering teachers, goals are to improve teaching practices and reinforce collaborative work. SAPs also present goals for school organization improvement related to services and structures.

Activities proposed. This category refers to the activities designed to attain the above-mentioned goals. The proposed activities in SAPs concern students (e.g., support), teachers (e.g., teamwork, supervision, professional development), and school organization (e.g., resources).

SAP monitoring. This category refers to the objectives, indicators, and instruments to monitor SAP implementation. In SAPs, several indicators and instruments were identified.

Some of the emergent categories from the analysis mentioned above are reported in the literature as quality indicators of school plans (e.g., Dunaway et al., 2012; Fernandez, 2011; Immordino et al., 2016; Strunk et al., 2016). In this study, the contributions of Fernandez (2011) and Strunk et al. (2016) were particularly considered because of the relevance of these works to the current study and the Portuguese context. Fernandez (2011), in his study on the relationship between the quality of plans and school performance, used a scoring rubric with 17 indicators to assess the different components of the plans. The indicators were (1) comprehensiveness, (2) specific goals, (3) measurable goals, (4) achievable goals, (5) relevant goals, (6) timely goals, (7) inquiry process, (8) research-based strategies, (9) master plan design, (10) professional development gaps, (11) professional development focus, (12) parental involvement, (13) monitoring plan, (14) monitoring frequency, (15) evaluation process, (16) use of time and opportunities, and (17) other required elements. Strunk et al. (2016), in a study about plan quality, factors associated with plan quality, and the relationship between plan quality and implementation, identified the following as indicators for high-quality school plans: (1) aligned with mission and vision, (2) tailored to student population/context, (3) high expectations for students and staff, (4) evidence- and research-based plans, (5) strong parent and community engagement, (6) strategic use of data, (7) implementable, (8) use of governance model/flexibility, and (9) quality of writing.

Combining content analysis of SAPs of Portuguese schools, national guidelines of the Portuguese Ministry of Education, and the two studies mentioned above, the grid of analysis was developed in this study. It included nine categories, as presented in Table 1, along with the definition of each category considered for the analysis in the second phase.

Table 1

Categories for Quality Plan Analysis

Category	Definition
Alignment	Relevant elements of the proposal are aligned with the school's mission/vision and national priorities.
Tailored to the students' population and school context	The proposal presents relevant data about students and school contexts that inform solutions. It includes support related to students' needs and school characteristics.
Comprehensiveness	The proposal presents a comprehensive and integrated nature. A clear and explicit link exists between needs, goals, and solutions.
SMART goals	The proposal presents specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely goals.
Evidence- and research-based strategies	The proposal explicitly identified evidence or research-based practices or strategies to be used.
Parental and community involvement	The proposal identifies activities for parents or community members, or it implies their involvement somehow.
Implementation	The proposal specifies how the plans and their actions intend to be implemented.
Data-based decisions and monitoring	The proposal includes a specific and coherent plan for monitoring and data-based decisions (indicators, instruments, moments, participants, regulation, and feedback).
Professional development focus	The proposal includes an integrated and articulated plan for professional development.

3.2. What are the main characteristics of the SAPs of Portuguese schools considering the quality indicators previously defined?

In the second phase, the quality of SAP was analyzed through the indicators previously defined (Table 1). All the 663 SAPs were analyzed. Table 2 presents the frequencies and percentages of references coded in each category. Along with the description of the results, extracts of SAP are used to illustrate. Their code identifies the respective SAP (for example, 304_M identified the SAP number 304 of Measures type).

Table 2

Categories for Quality Plan Analysis

Category	Coded references	
	Frequencies	Percentages
Alignment	4,358	37.03%
Tailored to the students' population and school context	46	0.44%
Comprehensiveness	0	0
SMART goals	976	7.02%
Evidence- and research-based strategies	0	0
Parental and community involvement	802	0.50%
Implementation	9,182	55.01%
Data-based decisions and monitoring	0	0
Professional development focus	0	0
Total	15,364	100%

Alignment. This category refers to SAP identification with the school's mission, vision, and national priorities. The plans analyzed did not explicitly refer to the school's mission and vision. Nevertheless, some expressly considered national priorities previously identified in Portuguese Ministry of Education guidelines. Some of the priorities evidenced in the plans are prioritized intervention in the first school years, reinforcing collaborative work, and the use of differentiated instruction, as in the example below:

> Establish coteaching practices in the first and second levels of the school to create relative homogeneity to apply differentiated instruction strategies to support students with difficulties until the middle of the year and improve capabilities until the end of the year. (1_M)

As presented in Table 2, 37.03% of the coded references correspond to aspects of SAPs that cover national priorities for schools and education.

Tailored to students' population and school context. This category acknowledges relevant data about students and school contexts that inform the proposed solutions for problems in the SAPs. Designing for all students considering their specific needs and characteristics is particularly relevant in the Portuguese context considering inclusive policies adopted and generalized in all schools. However, in SAPs, the adequacy of the solutions to the students' needs is not always clear or explicit as the references to the students and school problems or needs do not mean that the plan responds to them. For the analysis purpose, data were coded only if the link between

students/school context characteristics and measures proposed was explicitly referred to. Only a few plans explicitly demonstrate the relationship between students' needs and solutions. In the example presented below, a clear relationship exists between students' needs in terms of reading/writing and the proposed solution to accomplish improvement in these specific skills.

> Problem identified: Low proficiency in reading and writing in the first and second levels of studies with a tendency to low in the second year of studies.
>
> Aim: Improve reading and writing proficiency in the first and second years of studies.
>
> Activities: Coteaching practices in the classroom to support students with difficulties; Organize homogeneous groups in terms of school performance; Organize groups by proficiency level. (304_M)

Comprehensiveness. This category highlights the comprehensive and integrated nature of SAPs by identifying a clear and explicit link between needs, goals, and solutions. The plans under consideration have problem identification, aims, and activities, yet there is no explicit and clear link. The comprehensive and integrated nature of these plans is not detailed in any of them. This can be explained by the template used by schools that the Ministry of Education provided. Even though guidelines refer to aspects related to comprehensiveness, the template does not offer this topic to be fulfilled.

SMART goals. This category refers to specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely goals designed for the plan. All the SAPs identified goals as it was a topic of the template provided by the Ministry of Education. However, most of the plans do not define goals in a SMART way, as evidenced by the following examples:

> Raise levels of success during the second year of studies (120_M)
>
> Develop teaching and learning differentiated and personalized practices using ICT. Raise the quality of students' academic success in the first and second years of school. (122_M)
>
> Reduce academic failure in the first cycle of studies, and the retention rate the second year of studies. (151_M)

Regardless of some of the relevant and specific goals that were identified, most are not measurable, timely defined, or even achievable. It is difficult to clearly define activities to accomplish goals and mostly to plan the monitoring process, both necessary for implementing quality plans.

Evidence- and research-based strategies. This category refers to proposals that explicitly identified evidence- and research-based practices or strategies to be used. The SAPs under

consideration have no references concerning this category, although some selected practices may be informed by evidence or research. In the Portuguese context, it is not usual to explicitly support practices on evidence or research, even though some evidence is used when planning in domains such as education or educational psychology. Since 2018, policies and laws have reinforced the preference for evidence-based practices. However, this was not a reality when elaborating on the first launched SAPs.

Parental and community involvement. This category is used when the proposal identifies activities for parents or community members or somehow implies their involvement. Some of the selected SAPs include activities both as an activity to respond to problem identification or as partners in activity implementation. An example of an activity for family intervention is presented:

> GAMES: Student and School and Social Mediation Service with a multidisciplinary team which includes psychologists and social workers; This service is responsible for an intervention program with students and families (…) (128_M).

Implementation. This category refers to how the plans and their actions intend to be implemented. Implementation is presented in all the plans, corresponding to 55.01% of the coded references. This was one of the topics of the template provided by the Ministry of Education, and all the plans present specific actions that intend to be implemented. The degree of description and explanation of actions varies significantly from plan to plan. Most of the plans refer to activities, resources, and participants involved in the implementation. An example is presented below:

> Organize groups of five students, for three hours a week, in another room. In the first cycle of studies, the teacher refers to students, and at the second cycle of studies, the teachers' council refer students;
>
> Develop students' work by phases ("learning packages"), expressed by learning descriptors. In the first cycle of studies, phases and descriptors are elaborated by students' teachers and support teachers. In the second cycle of studies, phases and descriptors are elaborated by teachers' councils and support teachers;
>
> Implement specific tasks to overcome learning difficulties by ICT and games. (109_M)

Data-based decisions and monitoring. This category means that the proposal includes a specific and coherent plan for monitoring and data-based decisions (including indicators, instruments, moments, participants, regulation, and feedback). The plans under consideration only include indicators and, in some cases, tools for data collection. Aspects like moments, participants,

regulation, and feedback are rarely presented or may even be inexistent. Despite the inclusion of this theme in the template provided, the schools could not elaborate on a specific and comprehensive plan for monitoring.

Professional development focus. This category refers to an integrated and articulated plan for professional development. All the plans include themes for professional capacity but not an integrated plan that can explicitly answer the school needs.

Discussion, Conclusion and Implications

There exists a consensus about the dire need for strategic planning toward school improvement. However, a common understanding persists that the existence of school plans is enough to guide school actions and positively impact change and improvement. Previous studies have underscored the fact that just having plans does not mean that the planning process is of high quality and integrates a comprehensive strategic action for school improvement (e.g., Fernandez, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2006; Strunk et al., 2016). Therefore, the quality of the SAP, as well as the quality of planning and implementation processes, must be explored. Research on SAPs and schools planning process quality is scarce (Fernandez, 2011; Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019; Strunk et al., 2016), and this study intended to explore this issue. Hence, a noteworthy contribution of this study was identifying the indicators that could be used to appraise the quality of the school SAPs (RQ1) and test these specific indicators by applying them to Portuguese schools' improvement plans (RQ2).

By qualitative content analysis of diverse data sources, nine quality indicators were defined: (1) alignment, (2) tailored to the students' population and school context, (3) comprehensiveness, (4) SMART goals, (5) evidence- and research-based strategies, (6) parental and community involvement, (7) implementation, (8) data-based decisions and monitoring, and (9) professional development focus. Some of these indicators were particularly informed by literature (e.g., evidence- and research-based strategies, comprehensiveness, and monitoring), and other indicators were selected in accordance with the analysis of school improvement plans and Portuguese guidelines (e.g., goals, implementation, professional development). It is worth noting that some of these indicators have gained particular relevance in light of the latest policies and laws implemented in Portugal (e.g., tailored to the students' population and school context, evidence-

and research-based strategies, data-based decisions and monitoring) such as the example of the Portuguese law of inclusive education published in 2018 (Decree-law 54/2018).

With this grid of indicators, SAP of Portuguese schools were analyzed for quality evaluation using the indicators previously determined. The results of this study indicate that school SAPs have included problem identification, aims, and solutions but excluded aspects like comprehensiveness, evidence-based practices, data-based decisions, as defined in this study. Indeed, the plans are much more a description or a list of actions than a tool to support the strategic action of a given school. This may undermine the plans' quality and implementation as it does not consider relevant quality dimensions. For example, the comprehensive and integrated nature of the plans was identified in the literature as a critical indicator of planning that relates to academic performance and school improvement (Fernandez, 2011). Equally important for school improvement are the use of evidence- and research-based practices (Garcia & Cerado, 2020) and data-based decisions (Schildkamp, 2019). However, in the SAPs under consideration, these dimensions are seriously compromised.

Despite some of the above-mentioned limitations of SAPs, two relevant dimensions were presented: alignment and implementation. It is relevant to discuss the extent and implications of SAP alignment with a specific vision (national priorities) and how it offers clear information to guide SAP implementation.

Educational literature relates plans' quality to plans' implementation, supporting the idea that planning must be strategically school-based (Davies, 2006, 2007; Eacott, 2008, 2011; Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). Strategy in education can be seen as thinking and choosing a direction within a given context (Carvalho et al., 2021a; Davies, 2006, 2007; Eacott, 2008, 2011). In this sense, short- to long-term plans must emerge from a strategic vision. In SAPs, alignment appears mostly related to national priorities granted by the Ministry of Education and less explicitly related to its specific school vision. From these data, one can question if the SAPs are really strategic because the authors of this study could not identify evidence that supports the alignment between the plans and the school mission or vision. It is indeed necessary to recognize that the alignment with national policies is also relevant as it represents a global mission for schools considering Portuguese context and its cultural specificities. Additionally, one needs to be cautious about the interpretation of these data, because the absence of explicit alignment between plans and school vision in SAP does not mean that this alignment does not exist. Although this may be true, it also

may be argued that some school principals elaborated on these plans to answer external expectations and requirements that do not necessarily respond to school needs or context problems (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). By the same token, another question to consider is: "Do principals have the tools they need" (Acton, 2021, p. 43) to be agents of change and improvement? Conditions related to professional development of leaders and teachers are stressed as fundamental for school strategy (Acton, 2021; Carvalho et al., 2021a) but may be not covered in planning and implementation processes.

Under these circumstances, the SAP may represent an effort to identify school problems and solutions considering the Ministry of Education guidelines. The template used supported schools and professionals in determining the list of topics to be considered in a plan and guided the planning process. Even though the guidelines and the template from the Ministry of Education have included plans' quality indicators, the SAPs that were analyzed seem to lack relevant dimensions such as a comprehensive nature, which integrates needs and solutions in a data-based process supported on evidence- and research-based options (Garcia & Cerado, 2020; Fernandez, 2011; Schildkamp, 2019; Strunk et al., 2016). Whereas the template created may be considered a tool to guide and support schools, it could also reduce principals' school autonomy and constrain strategic thinking and planning (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). More than just checkboxes for accomplishing external requirements, plans should be strategically articulated and aligned to the school mission and vision (Carvalho et al., 2021a; Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). Of course, conditions and supports for the planning of SAPs need to be acknowledged to understand better the results presented. For instance, the moment of the first SAP elaborated has occurred at the end of the school year, with overloaded teachers and schools with a limited timeline to accomplish this specific task. As presented in other studies, some of the desired dimensions for quality plans were sought but constrained by the conditions specified (e.g., Carvalho et al., 2021b).

The results of this study highlight the substantial challenges that policymakers and school leaders encounter for improvement and change. It is essential to improve strategic leadership in schools such that plans and actions explicitly represent the school vision and mission (Acton, 2021; Carvalho et al., 2021a). Besides, it is necessary to develop knowledge about what planning is and how to do it strategically when considering strategic planning. Providing adequate support and guidance for leaders and teachers and giving them time for action research collaboratively is central to high-quality plans (Bush, 2018; Day et al., 2011). In regard to participation, it is worth

noting that each teacher must be provided with the opportunity to participate (Carvalho et al., 2021b) also in addition to other stakeholders from the community. One relevant group to participate in are students with an attempt to improve school with students more than for students (Wells, 2019). Decision-making and planning must be predicated on purpose, compromise, and participation from the start to create conditions for adequate plan implementation and, consequently, for school improvement (Cheng, 2011; Strunk et al., 2016). Therefore, policymakers need to give attention to the previous model for planning, conditions, and timing.

Another relevant implication derived from our results is related to the guidelines and recommendations supporting school plan elaboration. First, a model must be designed for quality planning evaluation with explicit and relevant indicators. This proposal may serve to this end as it was tested in Portuguese schools. Second, guidelines and recommendations must be timely available to support leaders and teachers. Third, training and favorable conditions for growth must be provided to schools and professionals.

This study has contributed to discussions on the quality of school planning and school SAPs (and, therefore, schools improvement). However, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, this is a study devoted to a specific program that required Portuguese schools to elaborate plans, namely "strategic action plans". Even though this particular program still exists in Portugal, SAPs were time-framed. The study results are limited to the specific plans and must be interpreted accordingly. Second, even though all Portuguese SAPs were analyzed, other data were unavailable. It would be helpful to include qualitative data collected from leaders and teachers to enhance and test quality plan evaluation indicators. Therefore, further research in this field area is suggested.

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