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External School Evaluation Feedback and School Self-Evaluation: What Feedback Is Provided?

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Abstract

Concerns with educational quality have led to the implementation of external school evaluation (ESE), based on the premise that these processes can provide valuable information about schools and, consequently, create conditions for improvement. Improvement is based on the feedback, commonly in the form of an evaluation report, resulting from evaluations, describing the reality of each school, and providing clues and guidance for action and progress. Nonetheless, ESE still has a relatively weak impact on overall school improvement. With this in mind, this paper focuses on the potential of evaluation reports to promote improvement, aiming to answer the question: What kind of feedback on school self-evaluation (SSE) does ESE provide to schools? Focusing on the Portuguese case, the paper analyses the feedback regarding school self-evaluation provided in evaluation reports from the northern region of Portugal. The study concludes that the feedback provided in the reports is mainly descriptive and generic, referencing issues that apply to all schools rather than targeting issues specific to each school. This leads to the hypothesis that the vagueness of ESE feedback can explain the limited contribution external evaluations make towards SSE improvement in particular, and school improvement overall. The example of Portugal

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and self-evaluation can help bring to light where ESE processes are underperforming and require investment to achieve their goals.

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Introduction

The end of the 90s saw growing concerns over educational quality due to the greater attention being paid to students' learning and academic success, as well as to changes in school governance as powers were devolved from the state to the schools and school autonomy increased (Faubert, 2009). Governments transferred decision-making power to schools, while maintaining responsibilities for education funding and regulation (Figueiredo, Leite & Fernandes, 2018). This led to the establishment of accountability processes to ensure, as well as to promote, the quality of the educational service provided and to verify whether the resources invested were appropriately used and reached the desired outcomes (Figueiredo, Leite & Fernandes, 2018).

These concerns led to a rise in the implementation of quality assurance processes, which were considered helpful in assessing the quality of schools and supporting educational improvement (Ehren & Visscher, 2008; Figueiredo, Leite & Fernandes, 2018). As so, many countries implemented quality assurance systems based on school evaluations, either in the form of external school evaluation (ESE), school self-

evaluation (SSE), or a combination of both (Eurydice, 2004, 2015; Faubert, 2009).

The potential of evaluation to promote improvement is associated with the collection and analysis of data, thus generating knowledge and identifying needs and possibilities for action (Coe, 2009; Figueiredo, Leite & Fernandes, 2016a, 2016b, 2018; Gaertner et al., 2014; García, 2013; Leite et al., 2014; Lindahl & Beach, 2013; Schildkamp et al., 2012).

School self-evaluation processes can be defined as processes of evaluation that are designed and developed within schools by their own staff and emerged as a means for school management and improvement as well as accountability and regulation (MacBeath, 2004; Nevo, 2001).

Despite their increasing relevance in the drive for educational improvement, self-evaluation processes are still challenging for many schools (Figueiredo, Leite & Fernandes, 2018; Figueiredo, 2023). One of the most prevalent challenges refers to the difficulties faced by school staff stemming from insufficient knowledge and training, lack of knowledge regarding methodological procedures and process design, and overall insecurity. A fundamental issue with self-evaluations is that, in many cases, as self-evaluations have become mandatory, or at least highly recommended, schools and school staff are expected to develop self-evaluations as if this was already a well-known process, and without support or help (O'Brien, McNamara & O'Hara, 2014). The need to support schools with self-evaluation is well documented in literature (Leite, Fernandes & Rodrigues, 2020; Leite & Marinho 2021; Leite, Rodrigues & Fernandes, 2006; MacBeath, 1999; Nevo, 2001; O'Brien, McNamara & O'Hara, 2014). Some authors explore the role of a critical friend (Leite & Marinho, 2021; MacBeath, 1999; O'Brien, McNamara & O'Hara, 2014), someone outside the

school who collaborates with the staff, helping them debate and reflect on the matter, providing an outside perspective and support in process design and development.

External evaluations provide another possible source of support. In many countries, external evaluations are, amongst other objectives, aimed at fostering self-evaluation in schools as a means of assuring and improving educational quality. In these cases, external evaluations include an appraisal of schools' self-evaluation processes and results. The feedback provided by such evaluations can, with the right characteristics, provide support and help schools to improve SSE. In fact, scientific literature shows that SSE is often one of the issues scrutinised by ESE processes, and one where external evaluation have a more significant impact (Brown et al., 2018; Ferreira, 2016; Sá, 2018; Sampaio et al., 2016; Seabra et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, research has shown that ESE has a somewhat limited influence on school improvement, often due to the feedback provided and the insights it offers (Penninckx & Vanhoof, 2015). The range of any such improvement depends on the quality of the information provided in the feedback to schools (Behnk & Steins, 2017; Gustafsson et al., 2015). Also important is the feedback communication channel, which in the case of ESE is often an evaluation report. For reports to be a helpful source of feedback, they must provide not only a description of the situation, but also an evaluative judgment as well as some suggestions and guidelines for future action (Altrichter & Kemethofer, 2015; Gustafsson et al., 2015; Quintelier et al., 2018).

In Portugal, some authors state that one of the most significant impacts of ESE in schools regards self-evaluation processes (Bidarra et al., 2018; Ferreira, 2016; Figueiredo, Leite & Fernandes, 2018; Sá, 2018; Sampaio & Leite, 2016; Sampaio et al., 2016; Seabra et al., 2022). However, SSE

processes remain weak in Portuguese schools, lacking consistency broadness and impact, according to the general reports of external school evaluations (IGEC, 2011, 2018). One possible answer can be found in the nature of the feedback offered to schools as a result of external evaluations.

With this in mind, this paper focuses on the potential of evaluation reports to promote improvement, aiming to answer the question: What kind of feedback on SSE does ESE provide to schools?

Focusing on the Portuguese case, in which reports are the primary source of feedback in the ESE process, the paper analyses the feedback provided in evaluation reports regarding school self-evaluation, exploring the type of information provided, the presence or absence of feedback, and how this feedback can provide clues and suggestions for improvement.

Although focusing only the example of SSE, this paper's conclusions can also help those involved in ESE recognise how evaluations contribute to improvement, encouraging them to reflect on and revisit their procedures.

External School Evaluation and School Self-Evaluation: An Ongoing Relationship

The debate on the relationship between external evaluations and internal/self-evaluations has long been a feature of research into the subject (MacBeath, 2004, 2008; McNamara & O'Hara, 2012; Nevo, 1994, 2001; Vanhoof & Petegem, 2007). In many countries, the two forms of school evaluation coexist, leading to a discussion of the nature of this coexistence and/or how external and internal/self-evaluations can be articulated with one another.

MacBeath (2004) relates the origins of school self-evaluations, highlighting the pressure of external evaluations. The author refers to accountability concerns and demands, which led to political actions such as the implementation of external inspections or evaluations that more recently shifted to a combination of external and internal evaluations. This shift led to internal or self-evaluations becoming the main focus of external evaluations. Inspectorates or external evaluation teams draw primarily on information generated by the school self-evaluation process and appraise it. In this scenario, self-evaluations are somewhat subordinate to external evaluations.

Other authors refer to the relationship between ESE and SSE as part of the "whole school evaluation" approach, in which external and self-evaluations are two parts of a whole (McNamara & O'Hara, 2012; McNamara, O'Hara & Aingléis, 2002).

Literature also presents this relationship as one of collaboration, a symbiotic relationship in which both kinds of evaluations can benefit from one another. External evaluations can benefit from self-evaluation in a variety of ways (Nevo, 2001; Vanhoof & Petegem, 2007). The knowledge and information generated by self-evaluation can provide a deeper and contextualised perspective that is at times noticeably lacking. At the same time, this internal perspective can help give meaning to data and information gathered through external evaluation. Schools with a culture of self-evaluation are also more likely to be less resistant to external evaluations and feedback, using evaluation for their own benefit (Nevo, 2001; Penninckx et al, 2016; Vanhoof & Petegem, 2007).

Likewise, internal/self-evaluation benefits from the existence of external evaluations in a number of ways. External evaluations can serve as a stimulus for internal/self-evaluations (Nevo, 2001; Vanhoof

& Petegem, 2007), particularly if schools are subjected to external evaluations, or if in external evaluations, self-evaluation emerges "as a prior condition or counterpart" (Nevo, 2001, p. 98). Likewise, the image of the school constructed by external evaluation can help to broaden the analysis of the school made by internal/self-evaluations and provide new insights and information, while also contributing information about the national reality. External evaluations can also provide validation and help to legitimise self-evaluation when the latter is treated as an equally important process (Nevo, 2001; Vanhoof & Petegem, 2007).

External evaluation also promotes SSE improvement by setting expectations (Gustafsson et al., 2015). The use of evaluation frameworks helps schools become aware of the criteria they are judge upon, and work towards meeting the criteria. However, a number of conditions should be met for this to be achieved. For example, evaluations should adopt a formative attitude (Nevo, 1994) and be focused on providing understanding rather than judgement or scores (Nevo, 2001). Moreover, because general and vague judgements contribute little to improvement, evaluations should provide constructive feedback and recommendations. As Nevo states "providing sound, specific and practical recommendations is an integral part of evaluation" (2001, p. 101).

Evaluation should focus on specific and pertinent information (Nevo, 2001) and include an appraisal of different aspects of the school's functioning by compiling information derived from different sources, methods, and criteria (Nevo, 1994). Evaluations, in any form, should also be humble and respectful while also acknowledging their own limitations (MacBeath, 2004; Nevo, 2001). Evaluation is a process rather than just a single moment in time, entailing data collection,

analysis, feedback, negotiation, and dialogue, meaning that there should be a relationship between internal and external evaluators that features open channels of communication. Evaluation must be clear and fair to all parties, and if the aim is to promote improvement, all parties should bear responsibility and engage in efforts to reach that aim. This means not only that schools should try to reflect on the evaluation results and implement changes, but also that evaluators should provide expertise and support to schools (Petegem & Vanhoof, 2007).

Recent research has shown that, although still in a place of subordination, SSE is one of the main school areas to benefit from ESE (Brown et al., 2018; Ferreira, 2016; Sá, 2018; Sampaio et al., 2016; Seabra et al., 2022). This impact comes largely from the pressure exerted by ESE and the information it provides.

In the first case, research has shown that external evaluations become a source of pressure that leads schools to engage in self-evaluation, either for accountability purposes or to be better prepared for the external scrutiny they are about to endure. In the second case, schools receive useful feedback from external evaluations regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their self-evaluation processes. The feedback provided can help schools to identify issues that undermine the quality of their SSE processes, whether related to SSE design and planning, the methodology and/or procedures followed, data analysis, or data use, of which internal agents might be unaware (Leite et al., 2020; Nayir & McNamara, 2014). Based on such feedback, school leaders and staff are able to change their practices and improve SSE. However, the potential for improvement can become compromised unless feedback meets certain criteria.

Attention should be paid as to whether ESE provides sound, rigorous, and specific information or becomes a controlling mechanism that leads to standardisation of SSE processes by imposing, even if indirectly, a framework to be followed, consisting of the criteria used to appraise SSE (Brady, 2019; MacBeath, 2004, 2008; Richards, 2004; Sousa & Terrasêca, 2015)

Evaluation Feedback: Do's and Dont's

As stated previously, the potential for external evaluations to promote improvement is closely linked to the feedback provided, which is expected to be used by schools to take action (Behnk & Steins, 2017; Gustafsson et al., 2015). However, research has revealed a number of characteristics that feedback must exhibit if it is to be useful for schools.

First, the feedback must be *clear and understandable* (Devos & Verhoeven, 2003; Olafsdóttir et al., 2022; Schildkamp, 2019). There are two aspects to this parameter. First, when evaluations follow a specific framework or set of criteria, the feedback should later address those criteria. If there is no mention of the framework, it may not be clear what was evaluated and what the judgments made and conclusions reached refer to. Therefore, the clarity of feedback is related to its alignment with the evaluation criteria (Behnk & Steins, 2017). Second, the discourse must be direct, objective, and easy to follow by different audiences to be understandable and clear. In practical terms, the feedback must clearly identify the issues found, provide objective recommendations addressing the issues found, and avoid technical wording (Gustafsson et al., 2015).

Second, it must be *contextualised*, making clear and concrete references to the specific reality being evaluated (Behnk & Steins, 2017; Coe, 2009; Petegem & Vanhoof, 2007; Quintelier et al., 2020; Schildkamp, 2019;

Verhaeghe et al, 2015; Visscher & Coe, 2003). This means that the feedback should provide examples of issues and aspects found in each context and address them directly, avoiding vague references or a generic discourse that could equally apply to very different situations. In other words, despite the generalist nature of evaluation frameworks, ensuring their applicability to all schools, the information generated in the evaluation must refer to how each school is doing on each criterion, with specific references to school characteristics, functioning, strengths, weaknesses, and other relevant aspects.

Third, it must *provide clues for future action* (Behnk & Steins, 2017; Ehren & Visscher, 2008; Richards, 2020; Schildkamp, 2019; Visscher & Coe, 2003). Considering the aim of evaluations to promote improvement and the role of feedback as the main mechanism to help achieve such aims, the information provided in feedback must go beyond the "simple" description of situations to include guidance on what changes are needed and point towards solutions for problems found (Devos & Verhoeven, 2003; Olafsdóttir et al., 2022; Penninckx et al, 2014; Quintelier et al., 2018; Schildkamp, 2019). That is to say, feedback must be constructive and formative (Altrichter & Kemethofer, 2015; Figueiredo, Leite & Fernandes, 2017; Vanhoof & Van Petegem, 2007).

Fourth, feedback must *provide useful and meaningful information* (Gutwirth, Goffin & Vanhoof, 2021; Petegem & Vanhoof, 2007). This information should be relevant for the daily functioning of the school, meet the needs of individual schools (Verhaeghe et al, 2015), and refer to up-to-date information and data (Petegem & Vanhoof, 2007). This characteristic is closely related to feedback being contextualised. However, contextualisation does not, in itself, guarantee that feedback is meaningful and useful. It must also be relevant, addressing issues

and answering schools' needs and difficulties (Ehren & Swanborn, 2012; Datnow & Hubbard, 2016; Geel, Visscher & Teunis, 2017).

Fifth, attention should be paid to *how feedback is delivered* (Behnk & Steins, 2017), meaning that the channel of communication must be appropriate to the target audience, and that the message to convey is aligned with the characteristics explored above.

Research shows that with these characteristics, feedback is more likely to be used effectively by schools, their leaders, and professionals to learn and promote change and improvement (Behnke & Steins, 2017; Visscher & Coe, 2003).

School Self-evaluation in Portugal: From Legislation to the ESE Framework

In Portugal, school self-evaluation processes do not follow a common structure in all schools. In fact, as these processes are expected to be tailored to the specific characteristics of each school, no official guidance suggests how SSE should be developed. However, there are some references in the legislation regulating school evaluation that provide insight into what general features are expected of SSE. Likewise, the criteria followed in external evaluations of SSE provide clues as to what is valued in self-evaluations and what is expected from these processes.

Article 52 of the Portuguese Basic Law of the Education System, without referring to any specific form of evaluation, states that:

> *The education system must be continually evaluated, considering educational and pedagogical, psychological and sociological, organisational, economic and financial aspects, as well as those of a political-administrative and cultural nature.*

In Law no. 31/2002, which approves the education and non-higher education system, thus regulating school evaluation in Portugal, Article 6, devoted to self-evaluation, states that:

> *Self-evaluation is compulsory, is carried out on an ongoing basis, has the support of the educational administration and is based on the following terms of analysis: a) Degree to which the educational project has been implemented and the way in which the education, teaching and learning of children and students is prepared and implemented, taking into account their specific characteristics; b) Level of implementation of activities that provide educational climates and environments capable of generating the affective and emotional conditions of school life that are favourable to interaction, social integration, learning and the integral development of children's and students' personalities; c) Performance of the administration and management bodies of schools or school groupings, covering the functioning of school management and educational guidance structures, administrative functioning, resource management and the vision inherent in educational action, as a project and action plan; d) School success, assessed through the ability to promote school attendance and the results of the development of students' school learning, in particular the results identified through the learning assessment systems in force; e) The practice of a culture of collaboration between members of the educational community.*

From the excerpt above, it is possible to conclude that although no clear guidance is provided as to how SSE should be developed, it is still expected that the processes address the schools' functioning as a whole, from organisational aspects to management and pedagogy.

In the Portuguese process of external school evaluation,[1] school self-evaluation processes are assessed, their improvement being one of the main goals of ESE, as stated on the website of the General Inspectorate for Education and Science (IGEC) and in related structural documents (IGEC website[2]; IGEC, 2010, 2016, 2019). Each ESE cycle (see footnote for clarification) follows specific guidelines and frameworks. Figure 1 shows a synthesis of the criteria regarding SSE followed in each cycle.

[1] The Portuguese process of external school evaluation is developed by the IGEC in cycles of 4 years, on average, during which all schools are evaluated. At the end of each cycle, the process is evaluated and reformulated. It is currently in its third cycle, which began in 2018. Evaluations follow a specific framework of evaluation domains and topics. The process concludes with the publication of an evaluation report sent to schools and made publicly available on the IGEC website, with feedback and classification in each domain evaluated Classifications can be Insufficient, Sufficient, Good, Very Good, Excellent.
In the first ESE cycle (2006–2011), the topics were results, educational service provided, school management and organization, leadership, and school capacity for self-regulation and improvement, which includes the SSE process. In the second cycle of ESE (2011–2017), the topics were results, educational service provided, and leadership and management, which covers the SSE process. In the third cycle of ESE, currently in place (2018–), the topics are school self-evaluation, leadership and management, results, and educational service provided.
[2] IGEC website: https://www.igec.mec.pt

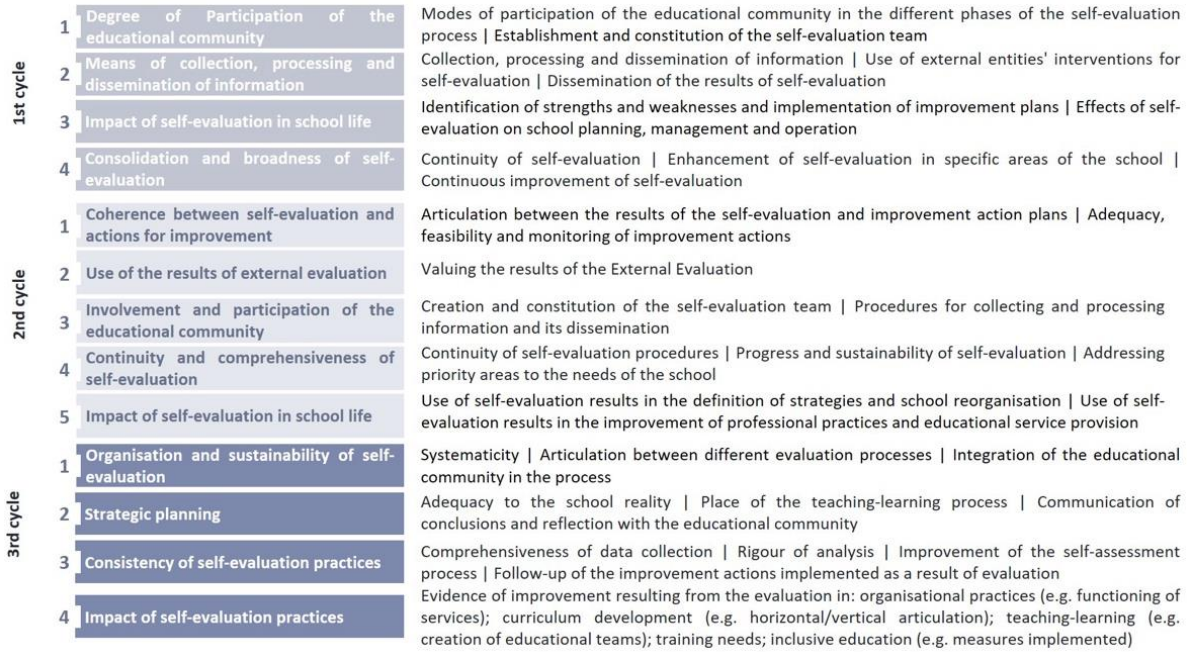

Figure 1. *Synthesis of the criteria followed in each cycle regarding SSE (own production)*

As can be seen in Figure 1, in the first cycle of ESE, four main aspects of self-evaluation were analysed: the involvement of the educational community in the process and the composition of the evaluation team; the methodology, including the reporting and dissemination of results; the impact of the SSE on school improvement; and the level of consolidation and scope of the process. In the second cycle of ESE, the criteria were expanded, and descriptors slightly changed, with the following three criteria retained: the participation of the educational community, the consolidation and scope of the SSE process, with emphasis on its progress and adequacy to the specific reality of the school, and the impact of SSE and the use of its results towards improvement. Two new criteria were added, namely, the coherence between SSE findings and actions for school improvement, which

complements or reinforces the focus on impact, and the relationship with external evaluation, especially regarding the use of ESE inputs for school improvement. SSE gained new criteria and a new organisation in the third cycle, the framework currently in use. The impact of SSE remains a criterion, although it is now analysed based on evidence of improvements resulting from the evaluation carried out in different fields of school action. The criterion of consolidation and sustainability of self-evaluation has also remained, as evidenced by its cyclical continuity, the participation of the educational community, and the articulation of SSE with other evaluative processes in the school. New criteria were added, such as the coherence of the SSE, with emphasis on the rigour and comprehensiveness of data collection and the evolution of the process itself, and strategic planning, which analyses the adequacy of the SSE process to the reality of the school, and the use of SSE for extended reflection.

Despite the differences and specificities in the three cycles, their common features together provide an image of what is expected of SSE: participation by the school community; rigour in collecting, processing, disseminating, and using information; articulation with other internal or external evaluation processes; broad, sustainable, systematic, and progressive evaluation; strategic identification of critical aspects; and impact, with effects on the planning and implementation of actions and improvements.

These are the topics around which knowledge and evaluation are produced and, therefore, expected to be addressed in the reports and feedback provided to schools, thus supporting change and improvement.

Method

This study followed a qualitative approach based on document analysis (Bowen, 2009), using thematic content analysis (Amado et al., 2017; Bardin, 2011) of all existing evaluation reports from schools in the northern region of Portugal since the first cycle of ESE in 2007 up to 2020, focusing only on the parts addressing the school self-evaluation processes. Reports were distributed as follows: 376 reports from the first cycle of ESE, 287 reports from the second, and 38 reports from the third. All documents were retrieved from the IGEC website.

The analysis framework stems from the characteristics of feedback explored in the previous section, which helped to pre-determine some thematic dimensions of analysis, combined with categories emerging from the documents, which account for the main themes in focus in the different documents. Reports were analysed through content analysis and frequency content analysis (Bardin, 2011).

The content analysis exploring and interpreting the text focused on the nature of the discourse, with two foci: 1) alignment between the evaluation frameworks' criteria and the evaluative judgements made in the reports, and 2) the generic or context-driven nature of the recommendations.

Table 1 presents the analysis rationale.

Table 1.
Analysis rationale (own production)

Feedback characteristics	Questions asked in the analysis	Focus of analysis	Other focuses	Procedure followed
Clarity and understandability	Does the report refer to the evaluation criteria present in the evaluation framework?	Alignment between the evaluation frameworks' criteria and the evaluative judgements made in the reports		Content analysis of the reports, focusing on the section regarding SSE
Providing clues for future action	Does the report make recommendations on what can be done to solve problems found, or only generic considerations?	Frequency analysis of the presence or absence of recommendations	Frequency of generic recommendations	Frequency content analysis of the reports, focusing on the section regarding SSE Detail analysis by ESE classification
			Frequency of specific recommendations	
Contextualised	Does the report make concrete references to the specific reality of the school evaluated or only generic considerations in the recommendations made?	Nature of the recommendations found: generic or context driven		Content analysis of the reports, focusing on the section regarding SSE

The analysis of the nature of the recommendations consisted of a content analysis of the discourse in each report through coding and categorisation. The unit of meaning considered for coding was the sentence or paragraph that conveys an idea. This level of analysis was targeted at three stated characteristics of feedback: *clear and understandable*, *contextualised*, and *providing clues for future action*. The

analysis focused on whether the discourse was intended as guidance or only of a descriptive nature. When recommendations were found, the analysis appraised if the report presented a description of the school's situation with detailed recommendations, targeting specific aspects for each school, and providing clues for problem-solving and improvement in a constructive/formative way, or if the discourse was vague and generic, and thus applicable to any school. Excerpts from reports are provided as examples. Table 2 presents the structure of content analysis.

Table 2.
Structure of analysis (own production)

Dimension	Category	Subcategory (emergent)
Alignment with evaluation framework/criteria	-------	-------
Recommendations for future action	Presence	-------
	Absence (only description)	-------
Nature of recommendations	Generic	-------
	Specific (formative/constructive)	Constitution of SSE teams
		Participation of the educational community in SSE
		Methodology
		Use of SSE conclusions/results

In this second focus of analysis, a frequency content analysis was made, aimed at identifying the presence (or absence) of recommendations in the ESE reports, detailing, when found, whether the recommendations were generic or context-driven. Based on the assumption that schools with lower classifications were more likely to receive recommendations to support improvement, the frequency analysis was detailed by classification.

The only aspects of feedback that were not analysed in this paper regard *how feedback is delivered* and *the provision of useful and meaningful information*, as these would demand data collection from schools.

Results

Alignment between the evaluation frameworks' criteria and the judgements made in the reports

The first aspect to emphasize is the consistency between the evaluative judgements in the reports and the criteria and descriptors from the evaluation frameworks.

In general, there is coherence between the reports and the criteria, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

> *The self-evaluation process is structured and coherent and has enabled the school group to relaunch its educational action, defining strategies for improvement in line with the guidelines and objectives set out in the SP. It needs, however, more active participation of the educational community and an extension to other areas. (Example from an ESE first-cycle report)*
>
> *Self-evaluation practices are disseminated in the different structures and intermediate bodies. The self-evaluation report […] demonstrates that the school is concerned about evaluating the areas considered*

> *structural to its functioning […] Although there are intentional and systematic self-evaluation practices, there is still a lack of improvement plans to make the impact visible. (Example from an ESE second-cycle report)*
>
> *The Cluster has been developing a self-evaluation process, articulated with the educational project […] The current self-evaluation process is based on a SWOT analysis […] with consultation with the educational community […] It is worth highlighting the impact of evaluation practices […] that promote improvement. (Example from an ESE third-cycle report)*

Based on the frameworks, it would be expected that reports addressed: 1) the quality of the SSE processes and methods used, 2) the impact on school improvement, 3) the participation of the education community in SSE, and 4) the coverage of the analysis carried out, and all related descriptors. The excerpts above show that the evaluative judgements were formulated based on those criteria, describing how schools are developing their SSE processes and their impact on school improvement. They also addressed the participation of the educational community, the articulation between school processes and structures, the coherence of practices (methodology), and the impact of the SSE on the functioning of the school (improvement).

Having responded to each of these aspects of the school's SSE, the reports can be said to demonstrate an *alignment with the evaluation framework/criteria*.

Presence or absence of recommendations in reports

Although the information provided in reports serves as the basis for improvement processes, more is needed for institutions to move forward, particularly in the form of constructive and formative

feedback, translated into recommendations for future action and clearly directed at the specific reality of each school. Figure 2 outlines the presence of recommendations in the evaluation reports in each cycle, distributed by the classification given to the domain of self-evaluation. Figure 3 furthers the analysis by focusing on the cases where recommendations were found, showing whether those are generic or context-driven.

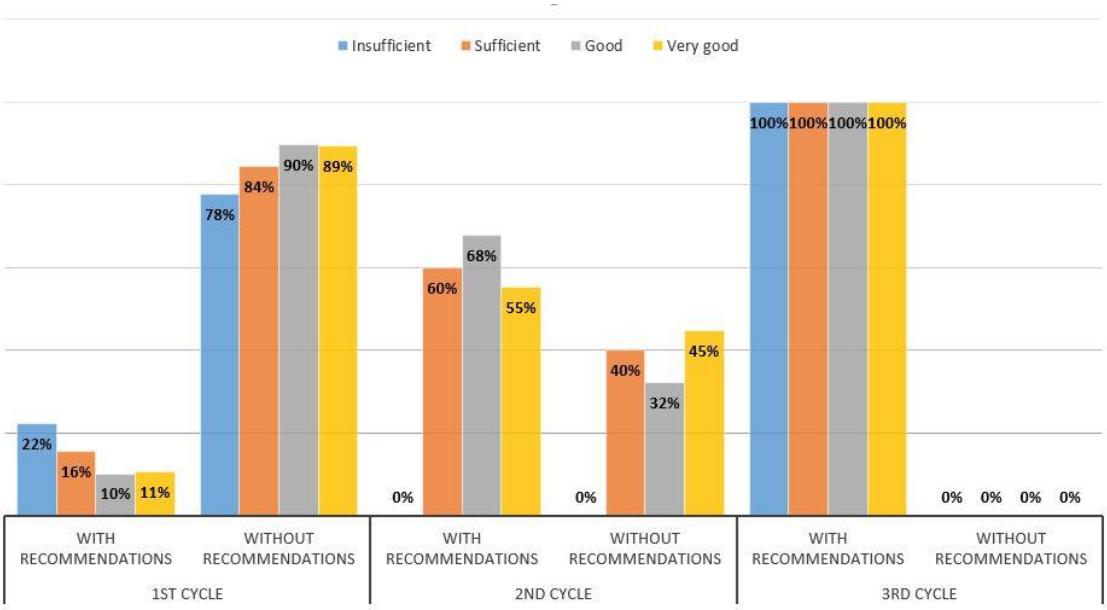

Figure 2. *Presence or absence of recommendations for improvement in the reports in each EES cycle (own production).*

Figure 2 indicates that all external evaluation cycles provided recommendations for improvement in the evaluation reports. However, there is an apparent disparity between the three cycles and by classification.

In the first cycle of external evaluation, most of the reports, regardless of the classification attributed to the domain of SSE, are of a descriptive nature. Only a small percentage of these provide recommendations, with this proportion progressively decreasing for higher classifications. As regards quantity, the percentage of reports with recommendations ranges from at most 22% in cases where the classification was the lowest (Insufficient) to only about 10% to 11% in cases where the classification was higher (Good and Very Good). The lower prevalence of recommendations for schools with higher classifications comes as no surprise, as it can be argued that schools demonstrating a high quality in their SSE need less guidance and support to continue working at the same level. In contrast, schools showing more difficulties require more support. Nonetheless, since a significant number of schools were given a negative classification (Insufficient), the low percentage of 22% may reveal a tendency, in the first cycle of ESE, to opt for a descriptive rather than a constructive approach to evaluative feedback.

In the second cycle of ESE, reports for schools in all classifications present recommendations on how to improve the school's self-evaluation processes, with a minimum of 55% and a maximum of 68% of reports including such recommendations. This could reveal a reversal of the trend identified in the first cycle. However, unlike the first cycle, there is no linear decrease in the percentage of reports with recommendations as classifications increase: the classification with the highest percentage of recommendations is the second highest (Good) and not the lowest (Sufficient). Similarly, there is a more balanced distribution between the percentage of reports presenting recommendations and those with purely descriptive information.

Finally, although the number of third-cycle reports available is significantly smaller compared to the first cycle, all of these reports provide recommendations for improving SSE processes in all classifications, including the highest one found (Very Good).

Having found that a significant number of reports present recommendations, it is now important to explore whether these are generic or context-driven.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of reports with recommendations of each type.

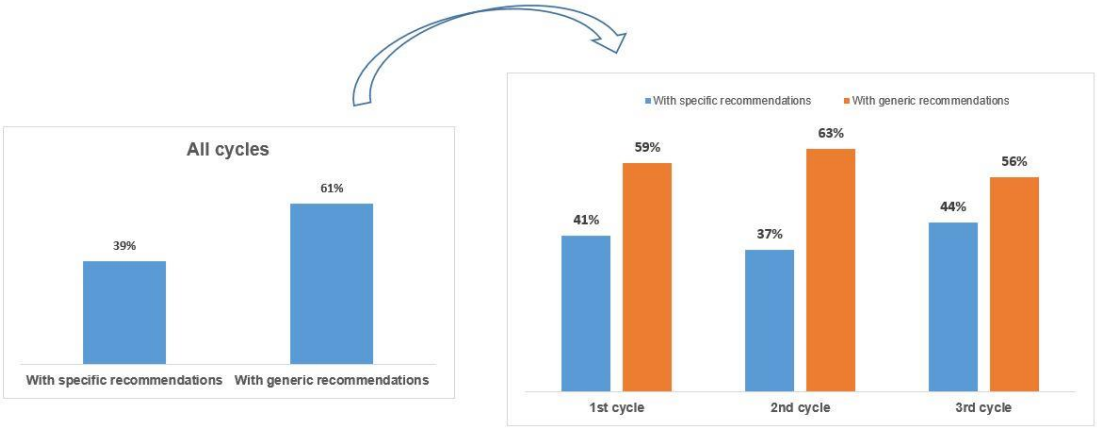

Figure 3. *Percentage of reports with recommendations of each type (own production).*

Two types of recommendations could be found in the evaluation reports: generic recommendations, focused on general ideas, and specific recommendations, addressing aspects specific to each school. As can be seen, most reports presented generic recommendations, with

only about 40% presenting specific recommendations. A similar distribution is found in each cycle of external evaluation.

Examples of generic recommendations are shown in the following excerpts:

> *The consolidation of the self-evaluation process, making it more comprehensive and impactful on professional practices. (Example from an ESE second-cycle report)*
>
> *The sustainability of its future progress depends on the capacity to make the internal evaluation process more participatory, comprehensive and coherent. (Example from an ESE third-cycle report)*

From the examples, the recommendations mainly address characteristics of self-evaluation contemplated in the evaluation criteria, which is expected from an evaluation report that follows a specific framework and set of criteria. Nonetheless, aspects such as *consolidation*, *impact*, *sustainability*, and *participation* can apply to every school context, regardless of its specificities, which does not allow for an in-depth analysis of each school's real situation and may not be sufficient for schools to take on improvement actions. For example, when it is said that the process should be 'more comprehensive and impactful', no indications are given regarding how the school could make it complete or what is missing. Likewise, while it is said that the SSE process needs to be 'more participatory, comprehensive and coherent', it is not clear how this can be achieved.

Moreover, discourse in these recommendations presents a certain level of standardisation, made evident by similar wording in the recommendations regarding the same aspects, as the following fragments show:

> *Consolidation of the self-evaluation process and the representativeness of the educational community in the self-evaluation team to give it greater visibility and recognition. (Example from an ESE first-cycle report)*
>
> *The consolidation and expansion of the self-evaluation process, to enhance its progress and the impacts of improvement plans. (Example from an ESE second-cycle report)*
>
> *The consolidation of the self-evaluation process and the consequent construction of action plans with an impact on the improvement of the educational service provided to the community. (Example from an ESE third-cycle report)*

Therefore, in the majority of the reports analysed, the feedback remains poor in terms of being contextualised, failing to provide a constructive/formative tool for schools, by providing clues for future action that could help schools overcome their difficulties, solve their problems, and benefit from an overall improvement.

Nonetheless, 39% of reports presented recommendations for improvements addressing specific aspects of the school evaluated, as the following examples show:

> *The Cluster needs to improve the structuring of self-evaluation, especially in terms of its systematisation and linking it to an improvement plan that takes account of the priorities established in organisational action... need to improve the process of dissemination and discussion. (Example from an ESE second-cycle report)*
>
> *To involve other actors (parents) and bodies (school assembly) and to make the self-evaluation process more systematic and sustainable: to link the data collected by the survey with those provided by the*

monitoring devices and the results of pupils in the periodic assessment and national examinations. (Example from an ESE third-cycle report)

The examples show concerns for realising the generic aspects present in the evaluation framework, e.g., the structuring of the process, the participation of the community, and the articulation with other processes and with the evidence collected in each school, such as by establishing links with improvement plans or involving parents and the school assembly. This approach demonstrates a contextualisation of the data collected through ESE in a meaningful orientation for schools' future actions towards improvement, an approach that is closer to what is expected of external evaluation processes. Not only is the feedback aligned with the evaluation frameworks/criteria, it does so by referring to the specificities of each school, promoting self-awareness and pointing towards solutions for the problems and issues identified.

However, although 39% of the reports present examples of context-oriented recommendations, it represents a small percentage overall. It can, then, be argued that the evaluation reports provide feedback that is still mostly generic and descriptive. While providing a description of the situations evaluated is important for awareness, this alone may not be sufficient to support change and improvement. Therefore, the desired qualities of being *clear and understandable* and *aligned with evaluation frameworks/criteria* seem to be achieved, while in terms of being *contextualised* and *providing clues for future action*, the reports seem to still fall short of what is desirable.

Discussion and Conclusion

The evaluative discourse from the reports undeniably conforms to the evaluation frameworks, addressing every descriptor and item used to

assess the quality of self-evaluation. In this sense, the Portuguese ESE seems to fulfil its function of producing information and generating knowledge, which has granted it visibility in educational policies (Eurydice, 2004, 2015; Faubert, 2009) and has been identified by researchers as a significant advantage of evaluation processes (Coe, 2009; Figueiredo, Leite & Fernandes, 2016a, 2016b, 2018; Gaertner et al., 2014; García, 2013; Leite et al., 2014; Lindahl & Beach, 2013; Schildkamp et al., 2012), constituting a solid step towards awareness and active improvement.

The analysis also revealed that most evaluative judgements do not go beyond simple description. While an objective description of the school's current situation is indisputably important, research shows that this alone does not suffice in the search for improvement (Devos & Verhoeven, 2003; Olafsdóttir et al., 2022; Quintelier et al., 2018; Schildkamp, 2019). The literature on the matter clearly states the need to provide constructive and formative feedback resulting from evaluations and, more importantly, feedback that is contextualised and specific to each school (Schildkamp, 2019; Visscher & Coe, 2003), since, as Coe states, "What works in one school may well not work in another" (2009, p. 371). The analysis uncovered a very different reality in the Portuguese ESE reports. Most feedback is based on generic references to elements of the self-evaluation processes without proper contextualisation, indicating a lack of engagement with supporting schools in their drive to improve. Thus, although feedback is given, it may be of little use to a school facing difficulties. It is merely a superficial discourse, based on the enunciation of evaluation descriptors, without due specification and contextualisation of the analysis made and the guidance offered. The generic nature of the recommendations fails to address the need for greater attention to the

diversity of school contexts, the variety of situations, conditions, and realities encountered, and the specificity of a self-evaluation process that is expected to be tailored to each school. This may hinder the process of improvement, as evaluators, being experts and external agents, have the potential to offer a refreshing perspective on schools and their possibilities (Ferreira, 2016; Figueiredo, Leite & Fernandes, 2018; Sá, 2018; Sampaio et al., 2016; Seabra et al., 2022;). Likewise, the resort to a vague and hollow discourse might reveal an attempt at unaccountability on the part of the evaluation agency, as may befit a new managerial approach to educational governance in which the state is no longer responsible for what happens but still acts as a supervisory body (Ball, 1998, 2001; Lingard, 2000, 2011; Ozga & Lawn, 2014). Likewise, the standardisation found in the reports may seem at odds with the need for an external evaluation that addresses the specific realities of each context and supports the development of self-evaluation processes appropriate to each situation. On the other hand, it may equally indicate a hidden agenda aiming at steering schools towards uniformity, following a predetermined conception of SSE processes. This contradicts the very nature of the "self" in self-evaluations. In this sense, ESE is closer to a regulatory process aimed at control and verification (Afonso, 2009, 2010; Justino & Almeida, 2016; Terrasêca, 2016; Veloso et al., 2011) rather than a supportive process aiming towards improvement. This is particularly concerning given that this was the predominant approach in all ESE cycles and is contrary to the official discourse framing external evaluations. These concerns lead to questions about whether there is an unspoken agenda, perhaps towards standardisation, given the similarity of the evaluative discourse.

However, examples were found where the feedback was tailored to each school, building on what was found and suggesting how it could be improved or obstacles overcome. It can then be argued that as the cycles evolve, there is a growing tendency to make use of the role of external evaluations in supporting change through constructive feedback, providing schools with knowledge regarding not only how they are performing but also how to improve the SSE processes themselves. The oscillation between the evaluation cycles in terms of recommendations – with few reports containing recommendations in the 1st ESE cycle, a better equilibrium of reports with and without recommendations in the 2nd cycle, and all reports with recommendations in the 3rd cycle, – is also worth noticing, particularly amongst the different classifications. Nonetheless, given that for feedback to be helpful, it must be context-specific, the presence of feedback alone does not consistently demonstrate that external evaluation feedback can support improvement. With context-driven recommendations, these reports can serve as a formative tool for schools, a pedagogical device providing constructive feedback that builds on the description of a school's reality to provide clues for future action. It would be worth further exploring whether reports with constructive feedback generated a more committed and active response from schools, leaders, and other professionals (Visscher & Coe, 2003).

Regarding this paper's research question, What kind of feedback on SSE does ESE provide to schools?, the study does not allow for a clear conclusion, largely due to the inconsistency in the type of feedback provided to schools. It is possible to conclude that all reports offer feedback to schools, and all check the box of being *aligned with the evaluation criteria*; however, only some go as far as being *clear and*

understandable, *contextualised*, and *providing clues for future action*. Additionally, the inconsistency found and the tendency towards description rather than concrete suggestions for improvement may explain why the impact of ESE on SSE improvement, in Portugal, remains limited (IGEC, 2011, 2018).

With this in mind, we can hypothesise that ESE can, in fact, contribute to school improvement, but for this contribution to be full and reach the potential of a whole-school evaluation approach (McNamara & O'Hara, 2012; McNamara, O'Hara & Aingléis, 2002), the feedback itself must be improved.

Although this paper concentrates on only one of the ESE evaluation domains, a few conclusions can be drawn from this study regarding the ESE process as a whole. It is: 1) well thought out, with evaluation frameworks that address various descriptors associated with the quality of the processes under evaluation; 2) continuous, as it occurs in evaluation cycles; 3) evolving, as each cycle is itself evaluated and reformulated; 4) oscillates between regulation and emancipation.

The example of Portugal and self-evaluation can help to shed light on where ESE processes are underperforming – greater attention to the feedback provided to schools is demanded if ESE processes are to achieve their goals.

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