Article

School Self-Evaluation in Decision Making: Perspectives from Portuguese School Leaders

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Abstract: This paper explores the use of school self-evaluation (SSE) conclusions in school leaders' decision making regarding school management. Originating from the understanding that school management is a complex process that thrives when informed and substantiated by rigorous and contextualised information on school functioning, this study highlights that SSE processes are a valuable source of such information. The present study was conducted following a qualitative approach in which 18 school leaders (i.e., headteachers) from schools in Portugal were interviewed through semi-structured interviews to explore how they perceive SSE, and if and how they use it to make decisions in their schools. The results reveal that school leaders value SSE processes and the knowledge produced by them as a source of contextualised information that can be used to validate and legitimise decisions. Likewise, the results indicate that school leaders use the information provided by SSE to inform their decisions in collaborative and shared debates and reflection processes with their school communities. Nonetheless, the headteachers also report some constraints in decision-making processes. It is evident that school leaders rely on SSE results and information to substantiate their decisions. Although not generalisable, these results provide valuable insights into the topic and contribute to closing a gap in the literature concerning the effective use of SSE in school management and decision making.

Keywords: school self-evaluation; decision making; school leaders; school management

1. Introduction

School evaluation (SE) processes gained relevance in Europe during the late 1990s and have since been increasingly recommended and implemented in several countries [1–3], either in the form of external school evaluation (ESE) or school self-evaluation (SSE). Portugal is no exception to this movement, with SE being legislated and made compulsory in 2002.

The relevance of SE stems from the belief that such processes can contribute to ensuring and promoting the quality of schools and their work whilst also serving accountability purposes [4]. Scientific research supports these ideas, arguing and having found that the production of contextualised and in-depth knowledge about school realities leads to reliable diagnoses, which can subsequently support informed decision making in school management [4–7]. In this setting, ESE and SSE contribute to local (school-level) and national (government-level) school and educational administration. Likewise, SSE became essential for schools' self-regulation and self-management, thus serving as a valuable asset in school leaders' decision making. Moreover, several authors argue that school management—and decisions made at this level—is more appropriate and likely to succeed when it relies on contextualised and specific information [8–10].

However, despite being a widely studied topic, little knowledge remains available about how SSE has been used for decision making in schools [7,11–14].

Within this context, a research project was conducted to explore the use of school self-evaluation processes in school management decision making. This research aimed to understand whether a relationship exists between the SSE processes developed in schools from the Porto region (Portugal) and the decision making regarding institutional management from the perspectives of school leaders.

This paper presents the main conclusions drawn from this study regarding the importance of SSE in school management and the dynamics of its use in decision making. The results also facilitated the identification of specific examples of such use.

Although the study's results cannot be generalised, they provide valuable insights into the topic since—as previously stated—SE is trending in several countries. This context implies that different national and local contexts could be facing similar situations, which renders the conclusions in this paper useful for reflection and debate. Furthermore, this study contributes to closing a gap in the literature concerning the effective use of SSE in school management and decision making.

On School Self-Evaluation and Decision Making in School Management: Some Theoretical Considerations

School management is a complex process that entails handling aspects related to human, material, and financial resources; hiring, acquisition, and management; infrastructure; class timetables; the operation of services; the distribution of professional services and duties; accountability to a supervisory body; compliance with regulations; the establishment of strategic partnerships; monitoring and decision making related to school organisation and teaching–learning processes; and the promotion of students' educational success. School leaders (i.e., headteachers) are the main actors responsible for making decisions regarding all of these aspects [15–20]. They are also responsible for creating healthy and motivating environments, involving staff, students, and the greater educational community, and valuing teachers' agency, autonomy, and leadership [21–23]. In Portugal, the headteacher is by law, since 2008, with Decree-law no. 75/2008, which establishes, in the introduction, the headteacher as the sole individual responsible for school management, constituting a "single-person authority" and being "entrusted with administrative, financial and pedagogical management, and to this end he or she chairs the pedagogical council".

Effective school management requires the decisions being made to be informed by rigorous information about the reality of the school [12], meaning that school leaders require viable and reliable sources of information to support and inform their decisions [8–10,24]. As such, SSE processes have become an obvious choice in this regard.

By definition, school self-evaluation is a process conducted by the school community. This is most likely to be performed by teachers, who are responsible for the design and implementation of evaluation procedures, as well as the analysis and reporting on the evaluation findings, providing an overview of how the school functions, and its strengths, shortcomings, and needs. Ultimately, this fosters awareness about the school and lays a foundation for improvement actions [4,5]. Due to these characteristics, SSE is perceived as an educational and school management instrument that is valuable in informing and supporting decision making at the school level and by school leaders.

Schildkamp et al. [13] emphasise the fundamental role of self-evaluation in producing data that headteachers can use to make informed decisions about school policies and practises, such as allocating resources and implementing pedagogical strategies to better meet students' needs. Antoniou et al. [25] and Geel et al. [10] stress that the data resulting from SSE can inform choices about where schools need to improve and how they can effectively implement change. Likewise, the author of [5] emphasises the importance of schools using self-evaluation to generate detailed knowledge about their functioning to identify strengths and areas for improvement. In other words, self-evaluation data can support school leaders in making informed decisions, prioritising areas of need, aligning resources more effectively to meet their school's strategic objectives and educational goals,

developing appropriate improvement strategies, and emphasising a commitment to continuous and sustainable improvement [4]. This can only be achieved through robust, sustainable, and consistent SSE processes. In their study, Hofman et al. [26] concluded that schools that adopt robust self-evaluation approaches better align their pedagogical and administrative practises with school improvement goals and show significant gains in student performance. Likewise, McNamara et al. [6] emphasise the importance of incorporating SSE processes into schools' daily routines, promoting autonomy, improving management capacity, and encouraging continuous improvement. SSE strengthens schools' ability to self-regulate and prepares them to make informed strategic decisions for improvement [5,27–29]. Furthermore, by resulting in improvement plans and creating opportunities for action, SSE processes also provide space and opportunities for school members to actively engage in improvement-seeking initiatives [30].

The value of an integrated and systematic approach to SSE processes is clear, as well as why it is an indispensable tool for school managers seeking to optimise educational processes and improve student learning.

However, the fulfilment of SSE potential for school management heavily depends on how school leaders perceive such processes [10,31]. It is along these lines that several authors highlight the importance of an SSE approach that is positively perceived by school leaders [14,31–33] and the entire teaching staff [11,34,35] since the success of SSE in driving continuous and sustainable improvement significantly depends on how the data are perceived and used by the school team.

The literature shows that school leaders mostly perceive evaluations as positive, emphasising their role in fostering awareness and contributing to school improvement and development [31,36]. However, even if school leaders recognise the relevance of evaluations, they face several constraints in effectively using SSE conclusions; examples are the legal requirements stemming from their leadership positions as the leading actors responsible and accountable for the school [31,36], or regarding internal resistance from the school community to either SSE or the changes it promotes [4].

Nevertheless, Brady [37] and McNamara et al. [38] highlight the importance of considering self-evaluation not only as a means of fulfilling external requirements but as a meaningful process shaped by the school context and the voices of the teachers and school community. Furthermore, Brown et al. [39] emphasise the need for precise, strategic alignment in the implementation of self-evaluation, stressing that when well planned and monitored, self-evaluation can empower schools to make informed decisions for continuous improvement, managing their resources to respond to identified needs and enhancing the possibilities to achieve the school's strategic goals.

Furthermore, the literature also highlights the role served by school professionals in such processes, with a particular emphasis on teachers and school leaders. For example, O'Brien et al. [40] argue for the fundamental role of teachers as agents of change within this system, highlighting the importance of involving them as leaders in the SSE process. Involving teachers in self-evaluation leadership promotes more inclusive and collective decision making, thereby strengthening collaborative and responsible actions among all involved, which is essential for continuous development and educational improvement. Moreover, organisational mechanisms such as robust training and the strategic use of data—while considering both strengths and weaknesses for a holistic and strategic view—are essential to facilitate a self-evaluation process that supports well-informed and action-oriented improvement-focused decisions.

Thus, self-evaluation can become an effective mechanism for decision making and school improvement when teachers have the freedom to define and apply their evaluation criteria, which can be adjusted to their specific circumstances and pedagogical objectives.

2. Methodology

In light of the above, this project aimed to explore and understand if and how the conclusions from the SSE process are used in decision making for school management by

school headteachers. To ensure that this aim was fulfilled, the first methodological decision made regarded the choice of the interviewees [41], who needed to possess privileged knowledge about the decision-making process in school management. Notably, headteachers being, as per the current legislation on school management in Portugal—Decree-law no. 75/2008—the ones responsible for school management and the decisions made regarding school functioning from resource management to services, and to pedagogical approaches and school success, and due to their top leadership roles and high levels of responsibility, thus being able to provide valuable information on the matter, are the obvious choice as key informants.

Methodologically, the study comprised interviews with school leaders (i.e., headteachers) from 18 schools in the Porto region. This was an exploratory and situated study developed only in this region of Portugal. Invitation to participate in the study was sent to the headteachers of all 53 schools in the region, via email. After the first invite, two follow-up contacts were made to reinforce the invitation and attempt to gather a wider number of participants since participation in the study was voluntary and thus dependent on their willingness and availability to participate. Of the 53 headteachers, 18, corresponding to approximately 34% of the schools from the Porto region, agreed to participate and were interviewed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews [42] since this type of interview relies on a flexible structure in which questions or topics are predetermined but posed in a manner that allows the interviewee to freely express themselves. This format allowed the research team to explore the issue under investigation and also uncover other unforeseen aspects shared by the interviewees. The interview script included general questions regarding the headteachers' academic and professional profile, the autonomy in school management, more specific questions about the school's self-evaluation process, the decision making process in general, and the relationship between SSE and decision making for school management. To ensure that the questions were appropriate for the purposes of the study, thus ensuring the validity and reliability [43] of the data to be collected, the script was developed in two subsequent and complementary phases. In the first phase, one of the team members drafted a first version of the script, having as a reference the research aims, defining thematic blocks with specific aims and questions formulated to answer them. In the second phase, the draft script was analysed by the remaining team members who made suggestions to improve the draft to better meet the research aims. The third and final phase consisted in a meeting in which the team members engaged in a brainstorming process to discuss the script blocks of aims and questions as per the study's aim, and reach the final version of the script. It is noteworthy to state that four of the five team members are experienced researchers with work developed on the research topic, rendering them as experts, thus ensuring the rigour and validity [43,44] of the script development process.

Table 1 presents the questions regarding the relationship between SSE and decision making for school management, which serve as the basis for the results presented herein.

Table 1. Details of the interview script regarding the relationship between school self-evaluation and decision making for school management.

Aim	Question
Explore the general perceptions of school leaders regarding SSE	Considering the SSE process specifically, we would like to ask you to share your opinions and perceptions regarding these processes.
Explore the role of SSE in the school management decision-making process	SSE processes produce a significant amount of data and information on the school. Do you believe this information is useful for your decision-making processes for school management? Can you, please, elaborate on your answer?

	The information generated through SSE is diverse, such as satisfaction with the school's functioning, students' results, and project assessment, among others. In your opinion, what type of information is more useful for your decision-making process?
Identify the dynamics of decision making based on SSE	How is the information generated through SSE used? Can you elaborate on the process of decision making based on the knowledge resulting from SSE?
Identify decisions made as a result of SSE information	Can you please provide some examples of decisions and changes made in the school based on SSE results?

These are the questions present in the interview script. Nonetheless, since it was a semi-structured interview, the dynamic during the interviews was more of a conversation, granting the interviewee freedom to express their opinions, perceptions, and experience, meaning that the questions were not always asked exactly using this formulation, and were sometimes re-posed with a different formulation or complemented with follow-up questions based on the information shared by the participants. This approach to inquiry—posing the questions with different formulations or follow-ups—was also strategically used to ensure that the information shared by the interviewees was reliable, since it allowed the confirmation or reiteration of their opinions and perceptions [43,44].

The data were transcribed to Microsoft Word format, and codes were assigned for the identification of all school leaders to ensure the confidentiality of the data. The letter D and sequential numbers from 1 to 18 were used to indicate the order in which the interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted online via VoIP tools (in this case, the Zoom platform), or in person at the respective school at a negotiated date and time, as per the convenience of the interviewees. Online interviews are a growing option for qualitative research [45]. In this study, online interviews were a valuable option used to overcome issues with distance, scheduling, and access to the participants, thereby allowing the research team to meet the preferences of the interviewees, who were given the opportunity to choose between online and in-person interviews. All interviews were conducted following the same strategies, approaches, and precautions, despite being in person or online, since the aim of the research and the technique—semi-structured interviews—remained the same [45]. Likewise, all ethical commitments were followed, with the interviewees signing an informed consent form, confirming that the project objectives and all relevant information were conveyed, and authorising the interview, recording, and use of the data for research purposes. When interviews were conducted in person, a document was signed. When interviews were online, a link to an informed consent form in *Google Docs* was previously sent to the interviewees so they could read it and give their authorisation. The request for form completion was made at the beginning of the interview, before the recording started.

The data were then analysed and systematised using a content analysis [46,47]. Table 2 shows the analysis structure, with the predetermined main categories defined based on the interview script, and the emergent categories resulting from the discourse of the interviewees.

Table 2. Analysis structure regarding relationship between school self-evaluation and decision making for school management.

Predetermined Categories	Emergent Categories/Subcategories
Perceptions on SSE	General considerations regarding SSE
	The importance of school self-evaluation (SSE) in decision making
SSE in the decision-making process	Dynamics of the decision-making process
	Examples of changes/decisions made based on SSE

The process of the analysis consisted of the deep reading and analysis of the transcribed interviews in order to identify information shared by the interviewees regarding the two predetermined categories, perceptions on SSE and SSE in the decision-making process, and coding that information in the corresponding category. The coding units are units of sense, meaning that excerpts could be single sentences to full paragraphs transmitting an idea or addressing the theme of the category. Every unit of sense found was coded in the respective category. After this first phase of the analysis, the data were submitted to a second process of the analysis, which resulted in the identification of the subcategories, which are emergent categories created according to the nature of the information shared. A new coding and data organisation process was conducted in the second phase of the analysis. To ensure the rigour and validity of the data, three team members triangulated the analysis of the 18 interviews, and a document was conceived to systematise the data on the topics covered.

This paper will focus on three subcategories: the importance of school self-evaluation (SSE) in decision making; dynamics of the decision-making process; and examples of changes/decisions made based on SSE. The results present the interpretation of the data gathered and the construction of new meanings and knowledge by the research team, which were sustained by the theoretical framework of reference and substantiated by quotes from the interviews that better illustrate the main ideas in each section/subsection.

3. Results and Discussion

As stated in the Introduction of this paper, the study aimed to explore if and how school leaders use the conclusions from SSE in their school management decision-making processes. This section attempts to respond to this question. The data collected allowed us to explore the perceptions of the importance attributed to SSE by these leaders, how it is used, and some concrete examples of decisions made based on the information generated by SSE.

3.1. The Importance of School Self-Evaluation (SSE) in Decision Making

The first aspect explored in the interviews was the school leaders' perceptions of SSE and its importance for decision making. It was relevant to begin with this area of exploration given that using data for decision making is vital to making well-informed and contextualised decisions, with SSE generating such information. However, using such information depends on recognising its relevance and need, as stated in the literature [14,32,33].

In this regard, the school leaders who were interviewed recognised and emphasised the importance of the conclusions drawn from SSE for decision making, stating the centrality of the information generated and suggesting that it forms a solid basis for their decision making.

According to the headteachers, SSE produces and systematises valuable information that they and their school communities can reflect on and debate about to support the decisions they make [5,28]. Furthermore, the headteachers referred to the reports resulting from SSE as essential assets and recurring tools used for the aforementioned in-depth reflections and discussions.

> The reports from the self-evaluation team are very important for decision-makers... they are especially a pillar for those who decide... (D2)

> And I always say that the self-evaluation report is that bedside book that we all undoubtedly have on our bedside tables. (D5)

> We realised that by monitoring, we were improving, and it led us to reflect. Decision-making is fundamentally based on gathering information. (D17)

From the interviews, it became clear that SSE processes led to the production of privileged and contextualised information about the functioning of schools, thereby providing comprehensive knowledge of the various aspects of school functioning, from student outcomes to staff engagement and resource allocation—thus generating data that are inherently specific to their context and the unique reality of the school. As such, SSE serves as a feedback mechanism and strategic tool for school leadership with data-driven insights into the schools' internal organisation [5,13]. Through the use of SSE, school leaders gain knowledge that enables a deep understanding of their school's reality, which is fundamental for a decision-making process that is both contextual and tailored to the institution and its identity. Furthermore, the specificity of the information generated is critical since it enables decisions that are customised to the institutional context [37,38]. Such decisions are more likely to be effective and respond to the institution's identity and needs [8–10]. Additionally, the continuous practice of self-evaluation prepares schools to respond adaptively to new challenges and ensure that decisions are based on a comprehensive and up-to-date understanding of the school.

The information generated through SSE is also relevant in headteachers' decision making since it provides evidence to support and substantiate the decisions and plans made to solve identified issues and promote improvement. This is illustrated in the following excerpts:

> And I can decide according to my perceptions. But now, if it is with something more scientific, I feel more secure... I am more secure. (D2)

> Also, to provide some sustainability... to the director himself, the management. To have some sustainability in some things they intend to do, in studies done by the self-evaluation team that are essential, which will substantiate... will give much more consistency to what we are going to advance. (D9)

Hence, school leaders feel more secure in their decision making since the decisions stem from solid and reliable information and knowledge generated through self-evaluation. SSE equips leaders with solid, data-driven evidence to underpin their decisions. School leaders can then use these data to defend their strategies and initiatives, thereby ensuring that all decisions are justified and substantiated by verifiable metrics and detailed information about how the school operates. Therefore, SSE is an indispensable tool for educational leadership, providing evidence to make decisions aligned with the context and identity of the institution, where the role of the school leader is not only administrative but also analytical and linked to continuous improvement [6].

Likewise, the results from SSE can also contribute to validating decisions already made—or yet to be made—by serving as the confirmation of existing perceptions. This is illustrated in the statement below:

> It was very important for me to get to know the school to be able to implement change. Because what I envisioned in my HIP [headteacher intervention plan] was what I believed. (D4)

This aspect is critical because it shifts decision making from a subjective dimension based on personal judgement to an objective dimension based on contextual evidence.

From what has been discussed thus far, the importance of SSE in decision making is three-sided: SSE provides reliable and contextualised information about the school, which

provides essential evidence to justify and support the decisions made whilst also validating previously made or planned options. Figure 1 illustrates the roles of SSE in headteachers' decision-making processes:
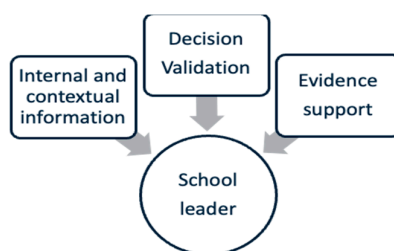

Figure 1. Tripartite role of SSE in school leaders' decision making.

It is possible to conclude that school leaders are aware of the importance of SSE outcomes in shaping their leadership practises. They acknowledge that these processes are more than simply the mere fulfilment of a legal requirement, but are also essential to the school's development and improvement given that, as D2 states, SSE serves as a 'foundation for decision-making'.

Moreover, the role of SSE extends beyond mere data collection. It is a strategic tool for continuous improvement, especially if schools engage in a cycle of evaluation and re-evaluation [5]. School self-evaluation is more than a mere compliance exercise; it is also a cornerstone of strategic school management. However, it can also help schools and headteachers meet accountability and transparency requirements, which are essential for effectiveness in education [12]. Moreover, this process of customised decision making strengthens the school's identity. By closely aligning decisions with the unique characteristics and goals of the institution, school leaders can foster a strong sense of identity and purpose within their schools. This alignment is critical for long-term strategic planning and building a cohesive school culture that reflects the school's values and goals [10,25,39]. Furthermore, the engagement of school leaders in this process not only reflects their commitment to improving school practises but also underlines the integral role of SSE as a driver for informed decisions and resulting actions aimed at the continuous improvement of school practises. Having clarified the relevance that school headteachers attribute to SSE, it is essential to delve into the dynamics of its utilisation in the decision-making process of these school leaders, which are explored in the following section.

3.1.1. Ladder-Style Dynamic for Decision Making

The previous section revealed that school leaders value SSE in schools' functioning, considering it essential for the decisions made in school management at different levels. With that in mind, it was our interest to delve deeper into how SSE is used in decision making after the production and systematisation of evaluation conclusions, for which the leaders gave an account of their decision-making processes. The following excerpts provide examples of the existing dynamics:

I analyse this report, which is also seen by the Pedagogical Council. So, the reports are also analysed by the Pedagogical Council... (D2)

Usually, the self-evaluation team produces a report, which is approved by the Pedagogical Council at the end of the school year. And so from there, the data are always sent to the curricular departments. (D3)

This report was presented to the community; therefore, the community had access, at least. The teachers and operational assistants were here at a meeting, and the student's guardians had access because—in addition to being on the school's website—it was also sent home by email. So everyone was aware of it. (D6)

> After the Pedagogical Council, ideas and reflections came out. The team would collate them and then produce the rest of the report, which was the improvement plan with contributions from the pedagogical report, for example, and then try to implement it… (SD7)

The first stage begins with the evaluation report being analysed by the top leadership (i.e., the headteacher), who begins a process of reflection of their own, as D2 shared.

In the second stage, the evaluation report is sent to all formal school structures (i.e., departments, pedagogical council, general council, and class council) for awareness raising and to promote and engage them in a broader reflexive process about the school's situation. This is evident in the statements from D2 and D3.

Similarly to the previous stage, the third stage consists of more comprehensive report dissemination to the general school community, again with the aim of awareness raising and reflection (D6).

In all stages, all those involved are expected to engage in the debate concerning the report findings. This should result in new ideas or suggestions being developed to overcome the identified issues, or the implementation of other necessary or desired changes and improvements, which will constitute the improvement plan (SD7).

Based on the above, it becomes clear that the dynamic followed corresponds to what can be called a ladder-style dynamic. This dynamic involves information going up and down the various structures and actors in the school, with decisions resulting from this continuous flow of communication. In this dynamic, all school community members are involved in the three decision-making stages: the dissemination of information, debate and reflection, and designing actions. Figure 2 illustrates this dynamic.
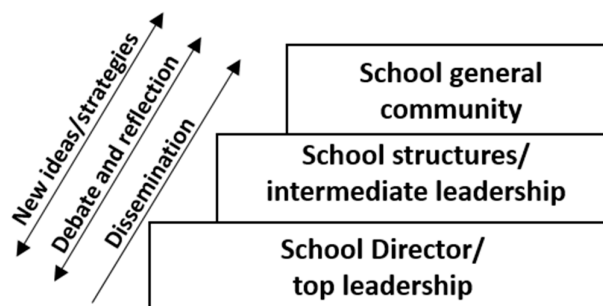

Figure 2. Ladder-style dynamic for decision making.

The ladder-style dynamic ensures that the entire school community is involved in the process of reflection and creates opportunities to think of strategies to solve the problems encountered or brainstorm new ideas in a shared and somewhat democratic decision-making process while also engaging and making people responsible for the decisions and future actions resulting from them. Furthermore, this process represents an opportunity to establish a school culture based on practical and impactful participation from the entire school community. This practice could also demonstrate a deliberative practice to engage and consider multiple perspectives before making a final decision [40].

The dynamic described above conveys a picture of shared responsibilities and commitment stemming from a type of leadership that values the active participation of all. This type of leadership also relies on the collaboration of the group, where the leader encourages participation based on the belief that the educational process thrives from this dynamic, transformational leadership that, as seen in the previous section, creates a democratic environment in school management and decision making [11,21,34,35,40].

However, this process comes with significant difficulties and challenges identified by school leaders, which limit the decision-making possibilities. These challenges include external barriers, internal resistance, and a lack of conditions in developing SSE.

External barriers consist of boundaries set by legislation, even in a framework of school autonomy, that limit the actions within an acceptable range of possibilities defined and determined externally, thereby inhibiting the school's range of action. Another significant external barrier regarding the legislation is its constant instability, with new policies being produced and implemented, sometimes resulting in contradicting orientations and requiring constant vigilance to avoid violating the regulations. Also included in these barriers are limitations in financial resources since many possible solutions involve acquiring materials or hiring human resources, which requires expenses that may not be supported by the existing budget or authorisations that are difficult to obtain.

> Sometimes, it is also a little frustrating for both the director and the self-evaluation team in certain situations... these are almost insurmountable problems because management does not allow us to take these steps forward. (D9)

Internal resistance relates to how people from the school community react to the decisions made and consequent actions. Some examples include difficulties in engaging people in new practises and solutions due to ingrained habits, feelings of mistrust and discomfort, or an overall lack of commitment from the educational community in the change process. Such resistance may be explained by how the school community understands SSE. The literature shows that SSE is often viewed as merely another form of control or bureaucratic process contributing to the already challenging teaching profession, which is met with feelings of scepticism regarding SSE's potential for improvement [4,5,34]. It is also difficult to engage all people in the process of change.

> Okay, but even here, we see a little of what I mentioned earlier, which is, shall we say, a certain conservationism, a certain detachment, or the presentation of certain barriers to changes, especially when they are more significant… (D3)

The lack of conditions in developing SSE is mostly due to the need for more training for professionals to develop a consistent and sustainable SSE process that can provide the necessary basis for reflection and debate and, consequently, inform the required change process. The issue of school professionals' preparedness for SSE has long been discussed in the literature and remains one of the most prominent challenges faced in this field. Although SSE is a process developed in several countries [1–3], research continuously shows that not enough investment was made in training school professionals and providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills to develop a structured and sustainable SSE process [5,48],

> There is no training, and the team really needs it. Thus, the team is always limited not only by the demands that I think self-evaluation has, but the team is always very constrained… (D13)

Furthermore, school leaders remain the ones with the final say and are ultimately responsible for the decisions made. In many cases, this is due to the legal requirements linked to their job, which pushes them towards a more individualistic posture and contradicts the democratic rationale that seems to motivate the ladder-style dynamic [21,31,36].

3.1.2. Examples of Decisions Based on SSE

Having established the central role of SSE in decision making and how it is used in school management—and whilst being aware of the existing gap in the literature concerning concrete cases of SSE use—the present study attempted to identify some practical examples of decisions being made based on SSE. The school leaders shared some insights on this matter, with examples including decisions linked to general school functioning, resource management, and school strategic action.

Examples of general school functioning actions include changes or redefinitions being made to school timetables, particularly involving the length of classes or the allocation of most classes in a specific period of the day. Additional examples include revisions and

changes to service opening hours (e.g., cafeteria or stationery shop), improving internal and external communication channels to make the dissemination of information and the contacts more efficient and agile, or creating a new position to ensure the quality of services (e.g., a food ombudsman was created in one of the studied schools).

> For example, the organisation of timetables. We now work in 50-min classes... it was something... it was a suggestion that the timetable be mainly in the morning. (D4)

> One thing that has improved considerably is communication between structures within the community, such as parents, teachers, operational assistants, technical assistants, and the image of the school group itself. (D6)

> It was promoted that there should be an ombudsperson among the parents for the food served to the pupils. This arose from the presentation of the work carried out by the self-evaluation team in debate with the parents, and this figure has now been created—this ombudsperson was born... (D9)

Changes in resource management relate to the allocation of human resources (i.e., staff) in functions best suited to their characteristics and profile, as well as the needs of the school and the school community.

> In the cafeteria at School X, we had some well-founded complaints. It had to do with a member of the staff. So we changed the staff member allocated to the cafeteria… (D11)

Examples of school strategic action include options to create better learning opportunities or better resources for the school, such as seeking out and/or joining funded projects to improve the educational service provided, obtaining financial and material resources, and establishing strategic partnerships.

> At the time, the internal evaluation team suggested that it should be a European approach. And this board has attempted to follow that example, and we are currently finalising... 6 applications... 2 of our own and 4 in partnership… (D16)

Although the examples above correspond to concrete decisions and actions, they remain superficial since none are related to the cornerstone of schools' work, teaching and learning—or even school leadership and management practises. The example closer to an effective change in educational practises relates to applying for funding to develop or participate in European projects (e.g., Erasmus+), which ultimately aim to develop skills and promote learning on a specific topic/content. The remaining examples can be classified as service and resource management, which—despite being extremely important in creating and ensuring a healthy, peaceful, and good school and learning environment—do not directly impact the pedagogical work. This estrangement from teaching and learning has been the target of scientific debate and is understood as a weakness in SSE use for school improvement [13].

Since SSE is considered vital to decision making resulting in successful schooling, this information raises questions regarding the depth of SSE processes, whether these include an analysis of teaching and learning, and, if so, how those data are used to improve teachers' practises, classroom environments, and students' achievements. Overall, it seems that SSE is increasingly being used in decision making but remains on the sidelines of teaching and learning [5,7,13].

4. Conclusions

The present study aimed to understand whether a relationship exists between the school self-evaluation processes and decision making regarding institutional management. The data revealed that this is a close relationship, with SSE being perceived as a vital asset in school leaders' decision making. Similarly, it is clear that the conclusions of the self-evaluation are valued as validation, evidence, and support for decision making. Moreover, SSE is recognised as supporting and guiding decision making.

The study also unveiled the dynamics followed to reach the decisions, revealing a primarily collaborative approach in which there is an attempt to actively involve the school community. Concerning decision making in particular, this emerges as a shared process based on reflection on the conclusions and proposals from the SSE, which involves participation and debate with the community. However, challenges associated with resistance and lack of preparedness from the school community still need to be addressed. Furthermore, external (i.e., legal) regulations and requirements also limit the potential for decision making.

The data also suggest that although SSE conclusions supported and gave way to changes and improvements made in school functioning, these remain at an organisational rather than pedagogical level, implying that the core activity of the school (i.e., teaching and learning) largely remains absent from SSE processes.

These conclusions reinforce the importance of self-evaluation processes for school management, administration, and development. Likewise, the research results emphasise the need to deepen the knowledge of how SSE is developed in schools and how it works as an effective instrument in school and educational improvement, mainly focusing on the relationship between SSE and teaching and learning. Moreover, the results call for a critical analysis by policy-makers since they denounce the difficulties faced by schools in developing SSE and by leaders in performing their functions, which should be acknowledged to provide the necessary support and tools for the formulation of future policies in the interest of education quality.

Finally, there are certain limitations in this study, which will be considered in future research. The first limitation is related to the small sample of school leaders interviewed and the geographical narrowness, which makes this a situated study and does not allow for generalisations. Nonetheless, the similarity and alignment in the school leaders' discourse must be highlighted since it hints at a commonality of situations in different schools that must be acknowledged and considered in future research. Moreover, since SSE processes exist in several countries, the study results can provide valuable insights to discuss national and local situations similar to those described in this paper.

Another limitation is that only school leaders were considered in this study, which provides a biassed view of the researched topic. Further research must be conducted with the involvement of other school community members to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the matter.

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