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Innovation or Reconfiguration? Educational Decentralization and the Changing Architectures of Public Management

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Abstract

Decentralization reforms are reshaping contemporary public management and are often presented as innovations capable of improving efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness to the citizens' demands. Yet their implications for governance arrangements remain highly contested. This paper critically analyzes the process of educational decentralization in Portugal to explore whether it represents a genuine administrative innovation or a broader reconfiguration of state governance. The study draws on a critical interpretative policy approach informed by post-structuralist policy analysis and the sociology of public policy instruments. Based on a qualitative analysis of legislation, policy documents, planning instruments, institutional reports, and governance arrangements, it applies a threefold analytical framework—Promise, Reality, and Transformation—linking policy discourse, instruments, and governance transformation. The findings suggest that while decentralization is discursively justified by narratives of modernization and local empowerment, it is operationalized through dense regulatory architectures, policy instruments, accountability mechanisms, and digital governance infrastructures. This leads to a paradoxical decentralized centralism, in which expanded local responsibilities coexist with strengthened capacities for central coordination, evaluation, and multilevel regulation. The study contributes to debates on public management and governance transformation by showing how decentralization may reconfigure rather than diminish state power in the context of contemporary multilevel governance.

Keywords: decentralization; public management; educational governance; policy instruments; multilevel governance; decentralized centralism; governance transformation

1. Introduction

The public sector is undergoing a significant transformation, shifting from traditional top-down bureaucratic control models to more networked, collaborative, evaluative, and digitally coordinated forms of governance (e.g., Rhodes, 1996). This means that the state no longer governs solely through direct command. Instead, it increasingly relies on multilevel coordination (Jessop, 2003), policy instruments, and data-driven infrastructures. In this regard, influenced by the New Public Management (NPM) legacy (Hood, 1991) and the emergence of digital government agendas (Gil-Garcia et al., 2018), public administration is placing an unprecedented emphasis on accountability, performance measures, and territorial coordination processes (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Within this context, decentralization



Received: 31 May 2026

Revised: 8 July 2026

Accepted: 8 July 2026

Published: 11 July 2026

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has emerged as one of the most widely adopted reform strategies worldwide, often approached as a tool for modernizing public administration by promising greater efficiency, democratic participation, and a public service close to the citizens it serves (Faguet, 2014; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Rondinelli et al., 1983). In this regard, some scholars argue that central governments are reconfiguring their modes of authority (Karlsen, 2000) through new forms of evaluation (Hudson, 2007), contractual agreements, and multilevel oversight (de Vries, 2000; Smoke, 2015), rather than retreating.

The central question is therefore whether Portuguese educational decentralization represents an administrative innovation or, primarily, a broader reconfiguration of the state governance capacities. In this article, innovation is not understood in a normative sense as an inherently positive reform outcome; rather, it refers to the introduction of new governance arrangements, policy instruments, and coordination mechanisms within public administration, while reconfiguration refers to changes in how governance capacities, coordination mechanisms, and regulatory instruments are organized and exercised among different institutional and territorial scales, and not simply to a redistribution of formal competencies.

Despite national regimes, education systems have increasingly evolved into complex networks of central ministries, municipalities, schools, and supranational actors (Grek, 2009; Rhodes, 1997). In this sense, the field of educational governance provides a particularly revealing context for observing these tensions of 21st-century public management (e.g., Ball, 2008; Maroy, 2009), and the case of Portugal is particularly relevant since the country has experienced successive waves of decentralization in the last two decades, while still adhering to the long-standing tradition of strong central regulation (e.g., Barroso, 2018).

Although existing research has examined the expansion of municipal responsibilities and the persistence of central regulation in Portuguese education (e.g., Fernandes, 2004; Formosinho & Machado, 2013; F. Teles, 2021; L. I. R. Santos et al., 2022; Grifo et al., 2023; Gonçalves et al., 2024; C. Rodrigues et al., 2026; C. d. A. N. Rodrigues et al., 2026), a significant gap remains, as less attention paid to understanding the interaction of decentralization reforms with the broader architectures of public management. Rather than evaluating the implementation of decentralization or measuring its outcomes, this article critically examines whether and how decentralization contributes to a broader reconfiguration of governance arrangements through the combined operation of policy instruments, territorial coordination mechanisms, accountability systems, and emerging digital and informational infrastructures (e.g., Williamson, 2016). In doing so, it offers a critical interpretive reassessment of Portuguese educational decentralization as a governance process, connecting debates on decentralized centralism, multilevel regulation, and policy instrumentation to broader transformations in twenty-first-century public management.

To address this gap, the article combines a post-structural policy analysis approach (Bacchi, 2009; Ball, 1993, 1994) with the sociology of public policy instruments (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007) to study decentralization as a governance process rather than a mere administrative reform. Based on a qualitative analysis of a documentary corpus that includes specific legislation, policy reports, planning instruments, inter-administrative contracts, and institutional documents, the study develops a tripartite analytical framework structured around three interconnected dimensions: Promise, Reality, and Transformation.

The article's main contribution lies in its critical-interpretive reappraisal of the architecture of Portuguese reforms. It does not simply embrace an existing governance framework but rather utilizes three dimensions that are generally treated separately: the discursive legitimation of decentralization (Promise), its operationalization through regulatory and digital instruments (Reality), and its consequences for the state's coordination capacities (Transformation). In doing so, it further elaborates Karlsen's (2000) concept of decentralized

centralism, showing how this phenomenon is materially sustained by contemporary policy instrumentation and multiscalar coordination.

Guided by the present framework, the present study attempts to answer the following central research question: How has educational decentralization in Portugal contributed to the reconfiguration of public management and educational governance through policy instruments, territorial coordination, and multilevel regulation? Upon addressing this question, the article is expected to raise the Portuguese case within the global public management debate, illustrating how decentralization reforms may simultaneously expand local responsibilities while strengthening central capacities for evaluation and infrastructural governance.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Centralization, Deconcentration, Delegation, and Decentralization: Conceptual Distinctions and Historical Transformations

Decentralization is frequently identified as a primary strategy for reforming rigid public administration (de Vries, 2000). However, this popular agenda is founded on a complex and often ambiguous concept that encompasses different types of power redistribution and governance restructuring (Smoke, 2015). To understand how authority changes, we must first recall the classical distinctions that define public administration (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

Following these distinctions in decentralization studies (Rondinelli et al., 1983; Edwards, 2010), we refer to centralization as the concentration of strategic planning, decision-making authority, and regulatory control within the state, while deconcentration involves the territorial redistribution of administrative functions and preserving hierarchical control. As delegation involves transferring specific responsibilities to intermediary organizations or agencies, with ultimate authority remaining with the central government, devolution represents the strongest form of decentralization, transferring decision-making authority, resources, and political autonomy to local governments. These distinctions themselves are particularly important for understanding the Portuguese case, where decentralization reforms coexist with enduring mechanisms of central coordination, regulation, and oversight. Table 1 summarizes the forms of power distribution traditionally associated with public administration reforms.

Table 1. Classical forms of power distribution.

Model	Main Characteristics	Distribution of Authority
Centralization	Decision-making, strategic planning, and regulatory control are concentrated in central administration.	Strong hierarchical control
Deconcentration	Territorial redistribution of administrative tasks to peripheral state agencies.	Limited local autonomy (maintenance of the hierarchical ties)
Delegation	Transfer of specific managerial functions to semi-autonomous or intermediary bodies	Conditional autonomy (indirect central control)
Decentralization (Devolution)	Real transfer of decision-making power, resources, and responsibilities to elected local authorities	Relative political and administrative autonomy

Source: Prepared by the authors based on Rondinelli et al. (1983) and Edwards (2010).

These conceptual subtleties are particularly relevant to understanding the Portuguese case. Historically, the Portuguese educational system has been characterized by an unusually strong tradition of centralized, bureaucratic regulation (Barroso, 2003; Formosinho & Machado, 2013). However, driven by international trends and New Public Management rationalities, the country has become an active promoter of decentralization reforms over the past two decades. The evolution of Portuguese educational governance is not a simple linear passage from the center to the periphery, but rather a complex overlapping pattern of deconcentration, territorialization, and multilevel coordination. The Portuguese reality can be better understood as a space of multiregulation, characterized by the co-existence of multiple regulatory actors, instruments, and scales of governance within the educational system (Barroso, 2018). In this hybrid governance environment, the delegation of logistical and administrative responsibilities to municipalities coexists with a post-bureaucratic central control (Maroy, 2009), increasingly exercised at a distance through technical, financial, and digital policy instruments (Williamson, 2016; Lima, 2021).

2.2. From Government to Governance: The Changing Logics of Public Management

Contemporary education systems no longer fit traditional categories of centralization or decentralization. Governance arrangements combine state regulation, local autonomy (Barroso, 2018), and network coordination (Marks, 1996). Therefore, authority is distributed across multiple actors and scales (Jessop, 2003), and new forms of regulation emerge through policy instruments, performance indicators, accountability systems, and information infrastructures (Williamson, 2016; Lima, 2021). Understanding decentralization, therefore, requires moving beyond the formal transfer of competencies to examine the broader governance arrangements that coordinate and regulate educational systems.

Since the late twentieth century, the non-flexible, top-down hierarchies of the state have progressively given way to networked, collaborative, and highly fragmented forms of coordination (Rhodes, 1996; Jessop, 2003). This was further accelerated by New Public Management (NPM), which substituted classic bureaucratic rule-following with a strong managerial focus on efficiency, performance standards, and accountability (e.g., Hood, 1991; Dunleavy & Hood, 1994).

In the educational field, the paradigm shift led to the emergence of an “evaluative state” (e.g., Neave, 2012; Costa, 2024) based on post-bureaucratic regulation (e.g., Maroy, 2009; Maroy & Voisin, 2013). Educational management is no longer governed solely by decree; it is carried out through strategic planning, indicator monitoring, and contractual agreements (Maroy, 2009). Governance is multilevel (e.g., Marks, 1996), with central governments, municipalities, schools, and supranational organizations (such as the EU) engaged in continuous negotiation and policy implementation, resulting in a complex network of “multiregulation” (e.g., Barroso, 2018).

Crucially, this landscape is being actively transformed by the development of digital and infrastructural governance (e.g., Williamson, 2016). The use of information systems, digital platforms, and data-based regulation is becoming an increasingly important feature of public administration, enabling what Lima (2021) describes as an “augmented bureaucracy,” that is, forms of public administration increasingly supported by informational infrastructures, monitoring systems, and digital coordination mechanisms which not only support administration but also transform the relationships between institutions and territories (Gil-Garcia et al., 2018).

Recent contributions suggest that the managerial logic associated with New Public Management (NPM), particularly its emphasis on efficiency, accountability, and the devolution of operational responsibilities, is increasingly being complemented by Digital-Era Governance (DEG) models (Mangai & Ayodele, 2025). Unlike the organizational

fragmentation often associated with NPM, DEG emphasizes the reintegration of public services through digital platforms, interoperable information systems, and data-informed administration. Building on this perspective, recent scholarship has proposed Accountable Digital Governance (ADG) as a complementary framework that combines NPM's managerial orientation with DEG's emphasis on technological integration, highlighting how digital infrastructures may strengthen coordination, accountability, and oversight across decentralized governance arrangements (Mangai & Ayodele, 2025). These developments point to a broader reconfiguration of state governance capacities in which information systems and digital infrastructures increasingly support strategic coordination and oversight while operational responsibilities continue to be exercised across decentralized governance arrangements (Vigoda-Gadot & Mizrahi, 2024).

Understanding educational decentralization, therefore, requires moving beyond the formal transfer of legal competencies to examine how policy instruments, evaluative infrastructures, and digital coordination systems shape the governance of local action at a distance (Ball, 2008; Carvalho & Gonçalves, 2025; Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007). In this perspective, digital governance is understood not as an independent reform agenda but as an increasingly important dimension of contemporary public management that complements policy instrumentation and multilevel governance. To synthesize these theoretical developments, Table 2 summarizes the evolution of contemporary governance models, from New Public Management to Digital-Era Governance and Infrastructural Governance, and their respective implications for educational governance and public management.

Table 2. Contemporary governance models.

Governance Model	Main Features	Regulatory Logic	Key References
New Public Management	Efficiency, performance, managerialism	Performance regulation	Hood (1991); Dunleavy and Hood (1994)
Network Governance and Metagovernance	Collaboration, interorganizational coordination, and orchestration of decentralized actors	Horizontal coordination and metagovernance through hands-off/hands-on instruments	Rhodes (1996); Kooiman (2003); Sørensen and Torfing (2021)
Multilevel governance	Interaction across transnational, national, and local governance scales	Shared regulation and multiregulation	Marks (1996); Barroso (2018)
Evaluative Governance	Monitoring, performance Indicators, and accountability	Governance at a distance	Hudson (2007); Maroy (2009); Ball (2008); Neave (2012)
Digital-Era (DEG) and Infrastructural Governance	Digital platforms, interoperability, information systems, data coordination, and digital infrastructures	Digital coordination, information management, and augmented bureaucracy	Williamson (2016); Lima (2021); Mangai and Ayodele (2025); Vigoda-Gadot and Mizrahi (2024)

Source: Prepared by the authors.

2.3. Educational Governance, Territorialization, and Multilevel Regulation

The proliferation of governance scales in Portugal has contributed to the territorialization of its education policy (e.g., Barroso, 2018), increasingly requiring local authorities to manage school networks, educational infrastructures, and social support policies. Several studies have highlighted the role of policy instruments, such as the Municipal Education Councils (CME), Educational Charters (Cartas Educativas), or the Local Educational Projects (PEL), in anchoring educational governance within local territorial planning (e.g.,

Cruz, 2012; Formosinho & Machado, 2013; Pinhal, 2012; S. Santos et al., 2019; L. I. R. Santos et al., 2022; Torres & Martins, 2025).

However, the transfer of local management responsibilities does not necessarily translate into local political autonomy. This paradox was conceptualized by Karlsen (2000) as decentralized centralism, a governance arrangement in which implementation responsibilities are redistributed to local actors while strategic coordination, regulatory authority, and evaluative capacities remain concentrated within the state. Local actors assume the operational, financial, and administrative responsibilities, while the central government retains strategic authority through conditional funding, evaluation procedures, and accountability systems (Maroy & Voisin, 2013).

Critical policy scholars have conceptualized these dynamics as forms of “governing at a distance” (e.g., Hudson, 2007; Ball, 2008). Viewed through these theoretical lenses, the Portuguese case illustrates reality, where the discursive promise of decentralization often runs into the institutional reality of post-bureaucratic regulation, with local action constrained by evaluative frameworks, standardized performance indicators, and centralized monitoring mechanisms (Carvalho & Costa, 2017; Lima, 2021).

To further explain how decentralized centralism operates in contemporary governance settings, it is necessary to examine the concept of metagovernance—understood as the governance of self-governance. As Sørensen and Torfing (2021) argue, metagovernance allows the central government to orchestrate collaborative, decentralized actors without reverting to traditional forms of hierarchical command-and-control. Metagovernance operates through a combination of “hands-off” tools, such as political, financial and institutional framing, and “hands-on” tools, such as continuous process management and monitoring. This perspective helps explain how local autonomy is simultaneously induced and strictly constrained by the state.

These interpretations are broadly consistent with international studies of governance reform, which highlight the growing importance of multilevel coordination, territorial planning, and intermunicipal cooperation in addressing longstanding patterns of centralization.

Taken together, those theoretical perspectives suggest that contemporary “decentralization” processes may not constitute a withdrawal of the state but rather a broader reconfiguration of governance arrangements across several institutional and territorial scales. The empirical analysis examines whether and how these theoretical expectations are reflected in the Portuguese educational governance system.

2.4. Policy Instruments and Governance Through Instruments

The operationalization of governing at a distance (e.g., Hudson, 2007; Ball, 2008) relies fundamentally on policy instruments. To analyze how decentralization reforms are operationalized, this study draws on the sociology of public policy instruments developed by Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007). From this critical perspective, policy instruments, including legislation, strategic plans, and funding programs, are not neutral administrative devices (Grifo et al., 2023). Instead, they function as technologies of governance (e.g., Ball, 1993) that organize the field of action, shape actors’ behavior, allocate responsibilities, and give concrete form to the regulatory logic of the state (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007). Recent Portuguese research suggests that these instruments constitute a central mechanism of local regulation and territorial coordination (e.g., Cordeiro et al., 2014; Grifo et al., 2023). More broadly, they function as key mechanisms of the evaluative state (Neave, 2012; Costa, 2024). The central government is able to steer local education without relying exclusively on traditional bureaucratic hierarchies (Maroy, 2009) through specific performance indicators, the obligation to sign inter-administrative agreements (e.g., Batista et al., 2017), and the requirement to comply with rigorous reporting procedures.

In the Portuguese decentralization process, governance is increasingly mediated through a diverse set of policy instruments, including legislative frameworks, educational charters (e.g., [L. I. R. Santos et al., 2022](#); [Grifo et al., 2025](#)), inter-administrative agreements, conditional funding programs (e.g., [Grifo et al., 2023](#)), monitoring systems, and emerging digital infrastructures ([Lima, 2021](#)). These instruments do not merely implement policy decisions; they actively shape relations among central authorities, municipalities, intermunicipal or metropolitan entities, and schools, shaping how responsibilities are coordinated, monitored, and enacted across several governance scales ([Carvalho & Gonçalves, 2025](#)).

2.5. Analytical Framework: The Promise, the Reality, and the Transformation

To analyze these dynamics, the article adopts a framework around three complementary analytical dimensions: Promise, Reality, and Transformation. Rather than representing successive stages of policy implementation, they provide distinct but complementary analytical perspectives through which the governance implications of decentralization can be examined.

The first analytical dimension, Promise, problematizes the discursive use of decentralization and its legitimation by dominant narratives of modernization, efficiency, and proximity to citizens' needs (e.g., [Rondinelli et al., 1983](#); [Faguet, 2014](#)). It examines how policy discourses construct educational problems to justify state reforms, drawing on [Bacchi's \(2009\)](#) "What's the Problem Represented to be?" and [Ball's \(1993\)](#) idea of policy as discourse.

The second dimension, Reality, challenges this rhetoric by looking at the actual processes of governance. It applies the sociology of public policy instruments ([Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007](#)) to the analysis of legislation, planning instruments such as educational charters and PELs, funding conditionalities, and digital infrastructures ([Lima, 2021](#)) as active "technologies of governance" ([Ball, 2003](#)) that constrain and structure local action.

The third dimension, Transformation, expands the focus to the wider, systemic effects of these reforms. Based on the concepts of decentralized centralism ([Karlsen, 2000](#)) and governing at a distance ([Hudson, 2007](#); [Ball, 2008](#)), it illustrates how the expansion of local responsibilities and the strengthening of data-informed accountability systems ([Carvalho & Costa, 2017](#)) contribute to new forms of multiregulation ([Barroso, 2018](#)).

Together, these three analytical dimensions move the analysis beyond the formal mapping of transferred competencies and provide an interpretive framework for examining the changing logics of public management in contemporary educational governance ([Maroy, 2009](#); [Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017](#)).

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and critical interpretive research design to examine how educational decentralization is represented, operationalized, and transformed through policy instruments, institutional arrangements, and multilevel governance mechanisms. The study combines qualitative document analysis ([Atkinson & Coffey, 2004](#); [Bowen, 2009](#)) and qualitative content analysis ([Mayring, 2014](#)) to investigate the governance rationalities, policy instruments, and regulatory arrangements associated with the decentralization of educational governance in Portugal.

The research is informed by post-structural policy analysis ([Ball, 1994](#); [Bacchi, 2009](#); [Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025](#)), which considers policies not simply as technical solutions to existing problems but as discursive and material practices that construct specific policy problems, shape institutional relations, and organize forms of governance ([Bacchi, 2009](#)). From this perspective, decentralization is approached not as a neutral administrative

process but as a policy phenomenon whose meanings, objectives, and effects are continuously produced through legislation, planning instruments, governance arrangements, and institutional practices (Ball et al., 2012).

This perspective is complemented by the sociology of public policy instruments (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007; Lascoumes & Simard, 2011), which emphasizes the role of policy instruments as active technologies of governance (Ball, 1993) rather than neutral administrative tools. Therefore, special attention is given to how planning mechanisms, contractual arrangements, funding structures, accountability systems, territorial coordination processes, and digital infrastructures contribute to the organization and regulation of educational governance across several scales (Carvalho & Gonçalves, 2025).

Consistent with this approach, documents are treated not as neutral repositories of information but as “documentary realities” (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004) that both reflect and shape governance processes. The study, therefore, focuses not on evaluating the effectiveness of decentralization reforms but on examining how decentralization is discursively legitimized (Bacchi, 2009), operationalized through governance instruments (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007), and associated with broader transformations in public management and educational governance (e.g., Karlsen, 2000; Barroso, 2018). This analytical orientation provides the foundation for the Promise–Reality–Transformation framework presented in the following section.

3.2. Analytical Strategy

The analytical strategy was designed to examine how educational decentralization is simultaneously justified, operationalized, and transformed through governance arrangements. The analysis was structured around the three previously framed analytical dimensions: Promise, Reality, and Transformation.

More than representing sequential stages of policy implementation, these dimensions function as complementary analytical perspectives through which decentralization can be examined (Mainardes, 2006) and enable the analysis of the relationships among policy discourses, governance instruments, and broader changes in public management and educational governance (Ball, 1994).

Promise focuses on the discursive construction and legitimation of decentralization (Ball, 1993), with special attention to narratives associated with modernization, efficiency, proximity, participation, local autonomy, and educational improvement (e.g., Rondinelli et al., 1983; Faguet, 2014). It explores how decentralization is presented as a solution to governance problems and how reform rationalities are mobilized to justify the redistribution of responsibilities across governance levels (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025).

Reality examines how decentralization is operationalized through governance instruments and institutional arrangements (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007), focusing on planning mechanisms, contractual arrangements, funding structures, accountability procedures, monitoring systems, and coordination mechanisms that govern its implementation and regulation in practice.

Transformation explores how these arrangements add to broader changes in governance architectures and public management configurations (de Vries, 2000; Smoke, 2015). It focuses on processes such as multilevel co-ordination (Barroso, 2018), evaluative governance (Hudson, 2007; Ball, 2008), digital and informational infrastructures (Lima, 2021), territorial regulation, and emerging forms of state steering that may reshape the relationships between central and local actors into a form of decentralized centralism (Karlsen, 2000). Table 3 concretely visualizes the analytical framework detailing the empirical indicators and expected governance-related observations.

Table 3. Operationalization of the analytical framework.

Analytical Dimensions	Theoretical Foundations	Empirical Indicators	Document Sources	Expected Observations
Promise	Ball (1993); Bacchi (2009); Bacchi and Goodwin (2025); Rondinelli et al. (1983); Faguet (2014)	Discursive markers of modernization, efficiency, proximity to citizens, local empowerment, and democratic participation.	Legislative preambles; OECD reports; policy strategies; government programs	Decentralization is discursively legitimized as a necessary administrative innovation to resolve state inefficiencies and improve local public service delivery.
Reality	Lascombes and Le Galès (2007)	Contractual logics, financing conditions, reporting obligations, standardized planning methodologies, and performance metrics.	Laws; inter-administrative contracts; educational charters, funding regulations (e.g., PIICIE)	Local action and operational autonomy are heavily constrained, standardized, and coordinated at a distance through dense regulatory and policy instruments.
Transformation	Karlsen (2000); Hudson (2007); Ball (2008); de Vries (2000); Smoke (2015); Barroso (2018); Lima (2021); Costa (2024)	New forms of multilevel coordination, digital infrastructures, evaluative governance tensions, and recentralization via instruments.	CNE and CE advisory recommendations; Court of Auditors reports; AGSE regulatory frameworks	The reconfiguration of state power into “decentralized centralism,” where operational tasks are localized but evaluative and infrastructural coordination remains centralized.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

These dimensions were not treated as mutually exclusive classifications; they served as heuristic devices to identify relationships, tensions, continuities, and contradictions across policy documents, governance instruments, and institutional arrangements (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025). To complement such analytical dimensions, the study also mobilized a set of cross-cutting governance categories and subcategories (Appendix B). Categories such as multilevel governance (Marks, 1996), policy instrumentation (Lascombes & Le Galès, 2007), territorial governance (L. I. R. Santos et al., 2022), evaluative governance (Costa, 2024), collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008), digital governance (Lima, 2021), infrastructural governance (Gulson & Sellar, 2019), and school autonomy (Maroy & Voisin, 2013) supported the interpretation of recurring patterns throughout the document corpus (Mayring, 2014).

3.3. Corpus and Data Collection

This study assembled a purposive and theoretically informed corpus focused on the decentralization of educational governance in Portugal. A detailed overview of the corpus is provided in Appendix A, which identifies the principal document categories, their role in the analysis, and their contribution to the analytical dimensions adopted in the study. Together with the cross-cutting governance categories (Appendix B), the governance instruments and coordination mechanisms (Appendix C), and the illustrative extraction matrix (Appendix D), these supplementary elements do not function merely as additional material but constitute an integral part of the study’s evidence architecture.

Document selection followed purposive sampling criteria consistent with qualitative policy research (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004; Mayring, 2014). Documents were included when they: (i) addressed educational decentralization, governance, territorial coordination, school autonomy, accountability, public management reform, or related governance instruments; (ii) had formal relevance to the Portuguese educational governance system; and (iii) contributed to the analysis of at least one of the three analytical dimensions adopted. Documents unrelated to educational governance, decentralization processes, governance arrangements, or policy instrumentation were excluded. To ensure auditability, inter-

subjective traceability, and methodological credibility, the document selection process is synthesized in a PRISMA-inspired flow diagram (Figure 1).

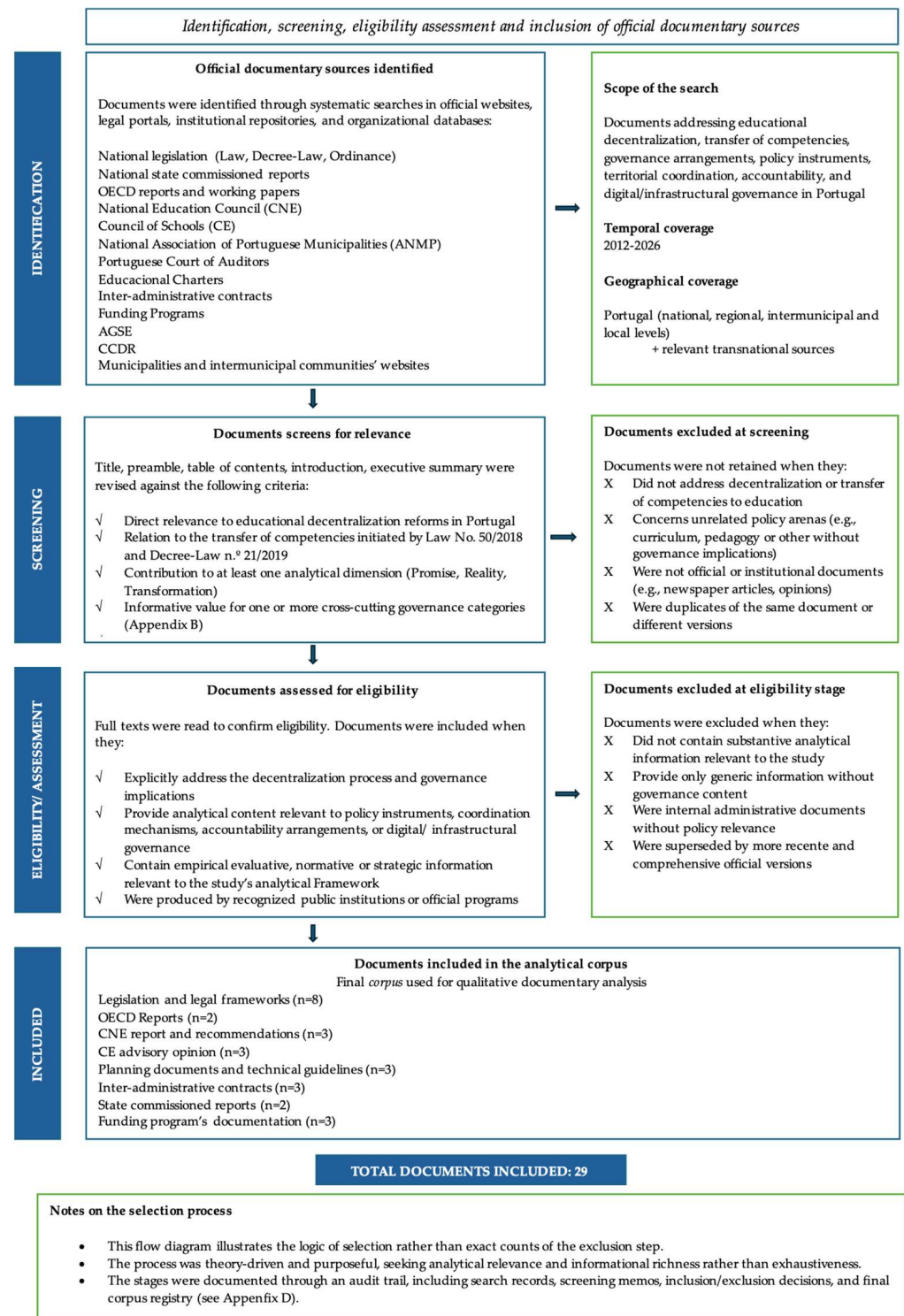


Figure 1. PRISMA-inspired documentary selection flow diagram. In the figure, vertical arrows represent sequential filtering phases and horizontal arrows represent exclusion points. The symbol ✓ indicates the inclusion criteria considered at each stage of the selection process, whereas X indicates the exclusion criteria applied at the corresponding stage.

The documentary corpus analyzed in this study consists exclusively of official documentary sources, including legislative and regulatory documents, policy reports, planning

instruments, funding programs, advisory recommendations, and institutional evaluations (Appendix A). These documents constituted the core of the empirical material used for the analysis.

The academic literature, including peer-reviewed studies on educational charters, funding programs, contractual arrangements, and governance reforms (e.g., [Fernandes, 2004](#); [Formosinho & Machado, 2013](#); [L. I. R. Santos et al., 2021, 2022](#); [Grifo et al., 2023](#); [Gonçalves et al., 2024](#); [H. Teles et al., 2025](#)), was not included in the corpus but was used as a secondary analytical resource that allowed the contextualization, interpretation, and triangulation of findings in the discussion of the results. This distinction ensures that the article's empirical claims are derived directly and exclusively from official documents, while the academic literature provides the theoretical and interpretative framing.

The corpus covers the period between 2012 and 2026, a timeframe chosen because it includes key developments of the Portuguese educational decentralization trajectory, such as the consolidation of the school autonomy regime, established by Law No.137/2012 ([Ministério da Educação e da Ciência, 2012](#)), the expansion of territorial governance instruments, and the emergence of new governance arrangements of digital and infrastructural nature. This period also includes the enactment of Decree-Law No. 21/2019 ([Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2019](#)), a milestone in the current decentralization process, and the creation of the Agency for the Management of the Education System (AGSE).

Following the sociology of public policy instruments ([Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007](#)), special attention was given to documents associated with planning, contractual, funding, evaluative, territorial, and digital governance instruments at different governance scales. As systematically mapped and synthesized in Appendix C, these instruments do not serve merely as supplementary examples but represent the principal governance arrangements that structure our analysis. These documents were particularly relevant for identifying and collecting evidence of implementation challenges, accountability arrangements, governance tensions, and emerging forms of multilevel coordination. To ensure analytical depth, they were collected across multiple governance levels and institutional contexts. This multi-scalar and multi-instrumental diversity, detailed across the study's appendices, enabled analysis of both the discursive construction of decentralization and the governance arrangements through which it is operationalized and coordinated.

3.4. Data Analysis

The analysis followed an iterative interpretive process of qualitative document analysis ([Atkinson & Coffey, 2004](#); [Bowen, 2009](#)), content analysis ([Mayring, 2014](#)), informed by post-structural policy analysis ([Ball, 1993, 1994](#); [Bacchi, 2009](#); [Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025](#)) and the sociology of public policy instruments ([Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007](#)). The objective was not to measure policy outcomes, but to examine how educational decentralization was represented, operationalized, and transformed through policy texts, governance instruments, and institutional arrangements.

In the first stage, the documents were approached as “documentary realities” ([Atkinson & Coffey, 2004](#)) and read repeatedly to identify their institutional function, governance scale, policy purpose, and relevance to the research question. This stage enabled the classification of documents by their role in the decentralization process, in accordance with the typologies established in Appendix A.

The second stage involved qualitative content analysis ([Mayring, 2014](#)) to find recurring themes, policy narratives, governance mechanisms, and institutional practices across the official documentary corpus. Attention was given to references associated with decentralization, school autonomy, territorial governance, multilevel coordination, accountability, policy instrumentation, digital governance, and state steering.

In the third stage, the identified contents were systematically coded using qualitative analysis, specifically following Mayring's (2014) deductive category application. Deductive coding was guided by the analytical scheme presented in Section 3.2 and operationalized through the analytical dimensions (Promise, Reality, and Transformation) and the empirical indicators summarized in Table 3.

To ensure a methodologically controlled analytical perspective and to prevent retrospective structuring, these three dimensions were translated into observable textual features and indicators during coding. Specifically, document passages containing discursive markers of modernization, efficiency, citizen-centeredness, and local empowerment were coded under Promise. Textual features detailing contractual logics, financing conditions, reporting obligations, performance metrics, and administrative burdens were assigned to Reality.

Finally, findings pointing to new forms of multilevel coordination, digital infrastructures, evaluative governance, or recentralization via instruments were bundled under Transformation. An illustrative extraction matrix exemplifying this coding process is provided in Appendix D. Additional theoretical coding was informed by the cross-cutting governance categories and subcategories presented in Appendix B. While the primary framework was deductive, inductive subcategories that emerged from the corpus were incorporated whenever they contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the decentralization process. Throughout the coding process, these categories and interpretations were refined by comparing categories across the official documentary corpus. Analytical notes were used to record emerging interpretations, recurring patterns, tensions, ambiguities, and apparent contradictions between policy objectives and documented governance arrangements.

The final phase consisted of an interpretive synthesis of the corpus. Inspired by the WPR approach (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025), the analysis explored how decentralization was represented as a solution to specific governance problems and how these representations were translated into concrete policy instruments and institutional arrangements. The sociology of public policy instruments (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007) provided the analytical foundation to examine how planning mechanisms, contractual arrangements, funding structures, accountability systems, territorial coordination processes, and digital infrastructures contributed to the organization and regulation of educational governance.

Rather than seeking causal proof, the analysis focused on identifying convergences, tensions, continuities, and governance patterns across the official documentary corpus. By comparing these diverse documentary sources, the study developed evidence-based interpretations concerning multilevel governance, decentralized centralism, evaluative governance, infrastructural governance, and the changing architectures of public management in Portuguese education.

Consistent with a post-structural policy approach, the study acknowledges that interpretation is theory-informed rather than theory-neutral. The analytical framework guided both coding and interpretation, while comparing different document types enabled the identification and consideration of alternative readings, ambiguities, and tensions within the decentralization process throughout the analysis.

To ensure methodological transparency and traceability, an audit trail of the coding process was maintained through detailed analytical memos that linked specific document excerpts to the pre-established categories. Furthermore, all primary documents were originally published in Portuguese. To preserve semantic accuracy, institutional nuances, and specific administrative terminology, the documents were coded and interpreted in the original language by the first researcher and revised by one of the other members, all of whom are fluent in the national context. Selected excerpts, policy terms, and discursive constructs were translated into English by the authors only during the manuscript drafting phase, undergoing cross-verification to ensure strict conceptual equivalence.

4. Results

4.1. *The Promise: Modernization, Proximity, and Educational Improvement*

The discursive legitimization of the educational decentralization process in Portugal is strongly grounded in principles commonly associated with New Public Management and contemporary governance reforms (e.g., Ball, 1994; Dunleavy & Hood, 1994; Neave, 2012; Lima, 2021) and is influenced by transnational agendas. Documentary evidence indicates that educational decentralization is predominantly legitimized through narratives of state modernization, proximity, efficiency, and territorial responsiveness. Legislative and policy documents consistently present decentralization as a strategy for improving public sector performance, strengthening local governance, and bringing decision-making processes closer to citizens. In this sense, educational decentralization is presented not only as an administrative reform, but also as a democratic and managerial innovation capable of improving the quality and effectiveness of public services. This framing is particularly evident in the preamble of Decree-Law No. 21/2019 ([Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2019](#)), where the transfer of competencies is presented as part of a broader effort to modernize the Portuguese state and reshape its operating model to respond more efficiently and effectively to citizens' needs. Similar arguments are found in OECD reports that characterize Portugal as a very centralized governance system and recommend stronger multilevel governance arrangements, enhanced territorial coordination, and greater local involvement in policy implementation ([OECD, 2019, 2020](#)). These documents present decentralization as a mechanism to increase policy responsiveness, improve administrative efficiency, and strengthen the quality of public sector performance.

The promise of proximity is also evident in policy discourse, which assumes that local actors possess the knowledge of territorial realities and are better positioned to design and implement educational responses adapted to local needs. Municipalities and intermunicipal entities are consequently portrayed as strategic actors capable of promoting innovation, improving service delivery, and fostering greater responsiveness to local challenges ([Assembleia da República, 2013, 2018; OECD, 2020](#)).

These narratives associate decentralization with a set of normative expectations that link local empowerment to modernization, efficiency, democratic participation, and educational improvement. Interpreted through the WPR approach ([Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025](#)), these policy texts do more than describe an administrative reform; they construct a particular representation of the problem itself. Excessive centralization, administrative distance, and limited territorial responsiveness are presented as governance problems, while decentralization is simultaneously constructed as the rational, necessary, and inevitable solution to the perceived shortcomings.

Through the Promise dimension, decentralization is discursively legitimized as both a managerial and a democratic innovation within broader public management reforming agendas. However, as the following section demonstrates, these narratives of modernization, proximity, and local empowerment are put into practice through a dense network of policy instruments, planning mechanisms, accountability arrangements, and coordination structures that shape the conditions under which local actors exercise their responsibilities.

4.2. *The Reality: Governing at a Distance Through Policy Instruments*

Documentary evidence indicates that the operationalization of decentralization in Portugal relies on a dense network of regulatory, financial, planning, contractual, evaluative, and informational instruments. The documents analyzed reveal the continued presence of governance arrangements that structure, coordinate, and monitor local action across multiple institutional scales.

Educational charters are among the principal planning instruments identified in the documentary corpus. According to Article 5 of Decree-Law No. 21/2019 ([Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2019](#)), these instruments are designed as prospective planning mechanisms to support the organization of school networks and the planning of educational provision through demographic projections, territorial diagnostics, and resource allocation criteria. Official technical guidelines suggest that educational charters contribute to the standardization of local planning processes by imposing the use of common indicators, standardized planning methodologies, and rigid technical procedures (e.g., [Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência et al., 2021](#)). These characteristics indicate that educational charters function not only as planning instruments but also as governance instruments that structure local decision-making within nationally defined frameworks, thereby reducing the scope for autonomous local educational projects.

A similar pattern emerges in relation to funding programs. Documentary evidence from programs to promote students' academic success, such as PIICIE ([CCDRC, 2016, 2020](#)) and PIPSE ([CCDRC, 2024](#)), shows that access to financial resources is tied to predefined goals, performance indicators, monitoring requirements, and reporting procedures. These programs are grounded in a broader national and European policy agenda and encourage municipalities and intermunicipal entities to align educational local interventions with externally defined priorities. As a result, funding arrangements serve not only as financial support mechanisms but also as instruments of coordination and policy steering.

Additional evidence of this governance logic can be observed in inter-administrative contracts established between municipalities and school clusters. Analysis of some of these publicly available municipal-school agreements reveals that they not only formalize the scope of delegated competencies but also define reporting obligations, monitoring procedures, financial responsibilities, and accountability requirements. Thus, inter-administrative contracts are an example of how decentralization is realized through contractual mechanisms that involve the transfer of competencies and formal mechanisms of accountability and coordination.

Empirical evidence from institutional evaluations, audit reports, and advisory recommendations signals recurring implementation challenges. The analysis of the reports from the Portuguese Court of Auditors ([Tribunal de Contas de Portugal, 2023, 2024](#)), the recommendations and technical assessments of the [Conselho Nacional de Educação \(2019, 2026\)](#) and the evaluation study commissioned by the state to Minho University ([Veiga et al., 2026](#)) shows recurring concerns about the adequacy of funding, human resources capacity, territorial asymmetries, institutional coordination and administrative coherence. All five of these documents show that decentralization, instead of reducing coordination mechanisms and complexity, has created new forms of coordination and interdependence between municipalities, schools, inter-municipal entities, and central government bodies.

Finally, the documentary corpus also highlights the growing importance of digital and informational infrastructures. An analysis of the legal framework establishing the Agency for the Management of the Education System (AGSE), Decree-Law No. 99/2025 ([Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2025a](#)), underlines the increasing importance of information systems, data management procedures, monitoring mechanisms, and interoperable digital platforms in the coordination of educational governance. Within this framework, the new agency is explicitly tasked with the building, operation, and maintenance of the integrated technological infrastructure of the educational system, including the Integrated Education Information System. These developments strengthen the capacity of central authorities to guide decentralized arrangements through information flows, evaluation procedures, and organizational integration.

The documentary evidence suggests that the implementation of educational decentralization relies on an interconnected set of planning instruments, funding mechanisms, contractual arrangements, accountability procedures, evaluation systems, and digital infrastructures. When interpreted through the sociology of public policy instruments (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007), these arrangements illustrate how governance may be exercised at a distance by shaping the conditions under which local actors perform their responsibilities. The concept of metagovernance provides a useful, complementary perspective on how these governance instruments operate in contemporary public administration. In the Portuguese context, the documentary evidence suggests that the central government is increasingly coordinating local actors through a combination of “hands-off” mechanisms, such as the conditional funding arrangements associated with PIICIE and PIPSE, and “hands-on” mechanisms, reflected in inter-administrative contracts, standardized reporting requirements, and information management procedures. More broadly, these governance arrangements point to the growing importance of digital and informational infrastructures in supporting coordination, monitoring, and accountability across decentralized governance arrangements. By embedding standardized reporting procedures and interoperable information systems into routine administrative practices, these instruments may reinforce the state’s capacity to coordinate local implementation while reducing discretionary variation across municipalities (Zou et al., 2023).

4.3. The Transformation: The Consolidation of Decentralized Centralism

The analysis of the documentary corpus suggests a convergence between the discursive objectives associated with decentralization (promise) and the governance arrangements through which the reform is operationalized (reality), identifying a recurring pattern: while responsibilities for implementation and service delivery are increasingly transferred to local actors, important mechanisms of coordination, monitoring, evaluation, and strategic direction remain organized at the national level.

This pattern is visible within the policy instruments themselves. For example, Article 15 of Decree-Law No. 21/2019 (Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2019) establishes the obligation to revise the educational charters when local planning deviates from the principles, objectives, and technical criteria set at the national level. Similarly, recent reforms in the state’s territorial administration, especially the reinforcement of the CCDR’s responsibilities (Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2023, 2025b), have introduced additional layers of coordination and control over educational planning and policy implementation. These arrangements point to a reconfiguration of the state’s capacity through multilevel governance mechanisms and territorial coordination structures.

Comparable concerns also emerge from the positions adopted by institutional actors. The Portuguese Council of Schools, for example, warned that decentralization could simultaneously increase municipal responsibilities and limit schools’ autonomy, describing this tendency as a form of decentralization *a contrario sensu* (Conselho das Escolas, 2017, p. 10). Such assessment suggests that decentralization does not simply redistribute authority between central and local levels but also redefines the relationships among municipalities, schools, intermunicipal entities, regional coordination structures, and state agencies.

The documentary evidence also suggests the growing importance of governance arrangements based on planning instruments, contractual mechanisms, monitoring systems, evaluation procedures, territorial coordination structures, and digital infrastructures. Educational charters, inter-administrative contracts, funding programs, coordination mechanisms of the CCDRs, accountability procedures, and the recent creation of AGSE all illustrate the emergence of a more complex governance architecture in which authority is exercised through multiple and interconnected forms of regulation.

The documentary evidence may also be interpreted as adding a new technological dimension to [Karlsen's \(2000\)](#) concept of decentralized centralism. Drawing on recent literature on infrastructural governance, the legal framework establishing AGSE may be interpreted analytically as reflecting a move toward Accountable Digital Governance (ADG) ([Mangai & Ayodele, 2025](#)). In this perspective, municipalities and schools continue to assume administrative and operational responsibilities while increasingly operating within digital information and reporting systems that support coordination across governance levels. At the same time, the legal framework assigns AGSE functions related to information management, system integration, and administrative coordination, thereby strengthening the state's capacity for coordination, monitoring and accountability through digital infrastructures. Viewed through this lens, these developments suggest that digital infrastructures may reinforce central coordination capacities while supporting decentralized implementation, indicating that educational decentralization can be understood as a broader reconfiguration of state governance capacities rather than a retreat of the state.

Taken together, these developments suggest a governance configuration that reflects the main analytical category of decentralized centralism ([Karlsen, 2000](#)). Responsibilities for implementation, management, and service delivery are redistributed across multiple governance levels, while strategic direction, regulatory authority, and evaluative capacity remain strongly coordinated through policy instruments and governance infrastructures. The documentary evidence points to a reconfiguration of state capacity through multilevel governance arrangements, territorial coordination mechanisms, and increasingly integrated systems of information and oversight.

From this angle, decentralization can be interpreted as more than a transfer of competencies. In this regard, the analysis suggests the emergence of governance configurations characterized by multilevel regulation and forms of multiregulation ([Barroso, 2018](#)) that involve state agencies, municipalities, intermunicipal entities, schools, advisory bodies, and digital coordination infrastructures. In this sense, decentralization appears not only as an administrative reform but also as a broader transformation of public management, pointing to a planned trajectory toward an expanded bureaucracy ([Lima, 2021](#)) in which autonomy and control are increasingly intertwined.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that educational decentralization in Portugal extends beyond the administrative transfer of competencies to municipalities and can be interpreted as part of a broader reconfiguration of governance arrangements. In this section, while the previous sections have described the specific national instruments and narratives, we contextualize these findings within the broader global discourse on public management in the 21st century. Building on the international literature, we discuss how the Portuguese experience parallels global trends, including the paradoxes of local autonomy, the rise of performance-based accountability, and the emergence of an "augmented bureaucracy" (e.g., [Lima, 2021](#)) driven by data-driven digital governance.

5.1. Regulated Decentralization and the Accountability Paradox

As discussed above, decentralization is often discursively legitimized through narratives of modernization, proximity, and democratic participation (e.g., [de Vries, 2000](#); [Smoke, 2015](#)). Building on an initial approach, which problematized this discursive construction of educational decentralization in Portugal primarily as a political promise ([C. Rodrigues et al., 2026](#)), the current analysis suggests that this promise is often translated into a dense architecture of regulated decentralization (e.g., [Barroso, 2018](#); [Maroy & Voisin, 2013](#)). In this sense, the global move from traditional hierarchical government to networked and

collaborative governance has not resulted in a diminished state, but rather a state that steers at a distance (e.g., [Rhodes, 1996](#); [Kooiman, 2003](#); [Hudson, 2007](#); [Gulson & Sellar, 2019](#)).

In contemporary public management, accountability systems have become the main instruments of such indirect steering. The trend of modern accountability to shift the focus from inputs to outputs, replacing the traditional bureaucratic control with performance evaluations, standard-setting, and strict contractual obligations, is widely documented in the international literature (e.g., [Sørensen & Torfing, 2021](#); [Maroy & Voisin, 2013](#)). The Portuguese case seems consistent with broader international trends identified in the literature, in which inter-administrative contracts, conditional funding mechanisms, and performance-oriented governance arrangements play an increasingly important role in steering decentralized systems. From this perspective, these developments resonate with what critical scholars have described as an “evaluative state” ([Neave, 2012](#)), characterized by growing reliance on accountability, monitoring, and performative forms of regulation ([Ball, 2003, 2015](#)).

Therefore, local autonomy is strongly conditioned by supranational and central targets (e.g., [Batista et al., 2017](#); [Grifo et al., 2023](#)). Local authorities are endowed with operational freedom but are tightly bound by centrally defined metrics and reporting obligations. The analysis points to an important paradox: The Promise of de-bureaucratization has instead generated a heavy administrative burden. As well documented in the recent performance audits by the Portuguese Court of Auditors (e.g., [Tribunal de Contas de Portugal, 2024](#)), the transfer of competencies is not without municipalities absorbing massive additional tasks of preparation, monitoring, control, and evaluation. The contractual arrangements established between municipalities and school clusters further illustrate this paradox. But those agreements, while extending local responsibilities to areas such as school maintenance, management of non-teaching staff, social support measures, and operational administration, also entail regular reporting, financial accountability, performance monitoring, and ongoing interaction with municipal authorities. These practices do not indicate unlimited local autonomy; rather, they show that decentralization is increasingly adopting contractual forms of governance that combine delegation with oversight. The analyses and recommendations from the National Education Council also indicate the same trend, with the growing complexity of governance arrangements and the need for greater coordination among municipalities, schools, intermunicipal entities, and central administrative bodies ([Conselho Nacional de Educação, 2025, 2026](#)). The increasing use of data-driven monitoring and coordination systems suggests that local authorities may be operating more within centrally defined policy frameworks, in which the expansion of local responsibilities remains closely tied to centrally defined priorities, accountability mechanisms, and performance requirements ([Karlsen, 2000](#); [Maroy, 2009](#)).

This dynamic is consistent with what [Lima \(2021\)](#) describes as a transition toward an “augmented bureaucracy,” rather than a reduction of bureaucracy.

5.2. Data-Driven Governance and the Infrastructural State

Digital transformation has become a key theme in public management in the 21st century, with important consequences for the mechanisms of state control. Digital government and data infrastructures are viewed not only as improvements in contemporary governance but also as its core, profoundly changing the relations between institutions and territories, as some authors argue (e.g., [Gil-Garcia et al., 2018](#); [Vigoda-Gadot & Mizrahi, 2024](#)). Although the documentary corpus does not allow a detailed analysis of specific digital platforms or data infrastructures, it nevertheless points to the growing institutional importance attributed to information systems, interoperability, monitoring mechanisms, and digital coordination arrangements.

Regarding our study, the documentary evidence suggests that the Portuguese context is broadly consistent with international findings on how digital integration creates new topologies of policy and power (e.g., [Gulson & Sellar, 2019](#)), especially in what concerns the very recent reorganization of the Portuguese regional commissions (CCDR) and the creation of a new centralized digital agency (AGSE). The creation of AGSE is particularly significant because it institutionalizes functions related to information management, system integration, and administrative coordination. As such, rather than claiming a fully operational digital control system, we frame this dimension of our analysis cautiously as an emerging and analytically inferred governance tendency. While it is still too early to assess its practical effects empirically, the legal framework of AGSE, particularly its mandate to develop, implement, and maintain the Integrated Education Information System, suggests a clear state intent to expand information management, system integration, and information infrastructure within contemporary educational governance. This dynamic may be interpreted as being broadly consistent with Accountable Digital Governance (ADG), in which the legal framework suggests an increasing reliance on technological platforms to steer local actors at a distance.

In the literature, several authors such as [Maroy and Voisin \(2013\)](#) and [Williamson \(2016\)](#) discuss the rise of a globally digitally governed educational space, in which data interoperability and digital platforms enable central governments to gain real-time visibility into local realities. Our analysis points to the international trend being also rooted in Portuguese efforts to optimize administrative processes and foster digital coordination. Digital platforms are reducing traditional information barriers, potentially generating public value, but also contributing to the concentration of evaluative control in the state ([Zou et al., 2023](#)). Documentary evidence suggests that digital infrastructures may function to facilitate the monitoring and coordination of decentralized actors through standardized information systems and interoperability arrangements. These dynamics lend support to the thesis that digital transformation in the public sector results in the regulation of algorithms and infrastructure that [Lima \(2021\)](#) refers to as an “augmented bureaucracy.” From this perspective, these digital instruments may help reinforce central coordination capacities while supporting local implementation processes, reshaping governance relationships in ways that are not always immediately visible ([Vigoda-Gadot & Mizrahi, 2014](#); [Gulson & Sellar, 2019](#)). These developments point to the emergence of an increasingly infrastructural form of state coordination, where coordination operates through informational systems, digital platforms, planning devices, and monitoring arrangements. These infrastructures extend the state’s capacity to steer decentralized actors across multiple territorial scales, rather than replacing traditional bureaucratic structures.

Furthermore, these new decentralization arrangements do not signal a retreat of the state. By structurally embedding new informational infrastructures, the state actively manages its profound impact on bureaucratic operations ([Vigoda-Gadot & Mizrahi, 2024](#)). In this context, the digital infrastructure is not a mere technical add-on; it is deliberately designed to make local dependence on central evaluation and digital platforms a permanent feature of educational governance. This strategy consolidates the reality of an “augmented bureaucracy” ([Lima, 2021](#)), demonstrating that decentralization operates as a highly sophisticated reconfiguration of state power.

5.3. Decentralized Centralism in a Global Context

The Portuguese case can be understood as broadly consistent with [Karlsen’s \(2000\)](#) concept of decentralized centralism, particularly in how contractual accountability arrangements and data-driven governance mechanisms coexist within decentralization reforms. Globally, delegating operational tasks to local governments, often driven by European

cohesion policies and transnational guidelines, does not entail a loss of state power (e.g., Antunes, 2004, 2006). It can, instead, be seen as a reconfiguration of governance relations, in which strategic coordination remains tied to policy instrumentation, accountability arrangements, and regulatory mechanisms (e.g., Barroso, 2005; Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007; Lascoumes & Simard, 2011). This interpretation aligns with concerns expressed by the Portuguese School Council, which warned that decentralization could expand municipal responsibilities while reducing schools' autonomy, thereby generating what it described as a form of decentralization *a contrario sensu* (Conselho das Escolas, 2017). Such tensions also help to demonstrate how decentralization often implies the redistribution, rather than the mere diffusion, of authority across levels of governance.

Intermunicipal programs such as Educ@RA, financed through PIICIE, provide a particularly telling example of this change. Rather than being merely educational improvement programs, these programs are based on collaborative and networked governance arrangements that link municipalities, intermunicipal communities, schools, universities, and central government priorities. In doing so, they create new spaces of coordination and policy steering that transcend traditional municipal boundaries, thus reinforcing the multilevel and relational character of contemporary educational governance.

The documentary evidence suggests that the Portuguese case presents a more nuanced picture, contrary to the prevailing narrative that public management in the 21st century entails the withdrawal of the state from public provision. In fact, state authority is being reinforced through the progressive use of evaluative, regulatory, and digital coordination mechanisms, which, in practice, operate as a highly effective form of metagovernance. These processes are often framed as decentralization or state retreat, but new regimes of central control are being inscribed in administrative routines, performance indicators, and interoperable digital infrastructures. As noted in the publicly available documents of the National Educational Council (Conselho Nacional de Educação, 2025, 2026), these tensions make Portugal a useful case to illustrate contemporary paradoxes of multilevel educational governance.

As demonstrated, despite the transfer of logistical, financial, and administrative responsibilities to the municipalities, which requires a new form of integrative public leadership to manage boundary-crossing collaborations at the local level (e.g., Parkkinen, 2024), the data systems, performance evaluations, and funding conditionalities are becoming increasingly tightly controlled by the central government. This interpretation is consistent with arguments suggesting that the rhetoric of local empowerment often coexists with forms of multiscalar regulation and “harder soft governance” (Knodt & Schoenefeld, 2020). Under this emerging governance configuration, local autonomy is both induced and strictly constrained by the very policy instruments originally designed to enable it (e.g., Barroso, 2005, 2018).

In this regard, the interpretations made in this study should be understood in light of its documentary and interpretive nature, which focuses on governance arrangements and policy rationalities rather than direct observation of local implementation practices.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

The present study intends to provide a comprehensive analysis of the contributions of educational decentralization in Portugal to the reconfiguration of public management and educational governance. However, certain methodological and analytical limits that emerged need to be acknowledged. First, the analysis was primarily based on policy documents, legislative frameworks, and institutional reports triangulated with academic literature. As such, the study lacks empirical investigation of local implementation practices, direct interviews with municipal actors, schools, or ministerial administration, and longi-

tudinal impact analyses. The study privileges the discursive, institutional, and structural dimensions of governance transformation over the micropolitical experiences of policy enactment in particular local contexts. As post-structuralist scholars have argued, policy is not simply text, but a process of ongoing creative translation and contestation (e.g., Ball, 1994; Ball et al., 2012), and our documentary focus leaves us limited in observing how these reforms are actually experienced, appropriated, circumvented, or transformed through resistance in local fields of practice.

Secondly, the analysis of the main policy instruments—such as the Educational Charters, Local Educational Projects (PEL), and PIICIE/PIPSE—was based mainly on the Portuguese academic literature and selected documents, rather than on systematic and comparative case studies. Future research could fill this empirical gap by using longitudinal designs or decentralization indices, as suggested by H. Teles et al. (2025), to systematically measure the long-term impacts of these policies. However, consistent with our post-structuralist perspective, future research should also avoid the traditional “problem-solving” rationalities that see policy implementation as a linear, technical process. Future qualitative studies should be grounded in policy problematization approaches (e.g., Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2025; Webb, 2014) to examine how the “problems” of decentralization are continuously represented and reconstructed in practice, and how local actors translate, contest, and subvert these regulatory instruments.

Finally, although the study highlights the growing institutional emphasis on infrastructural integration and digital governance, developments such as the recent creation of the Agency for the Management of the Education System (AGSE) should be interpreted cautiously as emerging governance arrangements. Because this study relies on documentary evidence and AGSE is still in the early stages of institutional development, its practical effects cannot yet be empirically assessed. Consequently, future research should examine this digital governance dimension through empirical studies of policy implementation and administrative practice. In particular, it will be important to investigate the extent to which AGSE develops in ways that are consistent with the principles of Accountable Digital Governance (ADG). Future empirical research should also explore how these emerging institutional arrangements shape everyday administrative practices and whether they contribute to reinforcing the dynamics associated with decentralized centralism. Comparative analyses of similar decentralization reforms in other European contexts would further clarify whether the Portuguese experience represents a distinctive institutional trajectory or reflects broader transformations in contemporary public management.

6. Conclusions

In this article, we argue that the educational decentralization process in Portugal can be understood not as a mere administrative innovation, but rather as a broader reconfiguration of public management and educational governance. Based on critical interpretive policy analysis and the sociology of public policy instruments, the study examined how decentralization is discursively legitimized, institutionally operationalized, and materially structured through a heterogeneous set of governance instruments and regulatory arrangements.

The Promise–Reality–Transformation analytical framework suggests significant tensions within the Portuguese reform process. Although decentralization is discursively constructed through narratives of modernization, efficiency, proximity, and local empowerment, the documentary evidence analyzed indicates that its operationalization relies on a dense network of planning instruments, accountability mechanisms, funding arrangements, and increasingly relevant informational and digital infrastructures. Educational Charters, the PIICIE program, monitoring systems, inter-administrative contracts, and emerging governance structures, such as the AGSE and CCDRs, illustrate how decentralization is

enacted through instruments that enable local action and frame the conditions under which that action takes place.

The results suggest that the Portuguese reform is consistent with broader transformations in contemporary governance arrangements, including the growing importance of metagovernance and digital governance within contemporary public management. Contrary to the idea of a retreat of the state, decentralization appears to be associated with new forms of multilevel coordination, territorial regulation, evaluative governance, and infrastructural steering. In this context, the decentralized centralism provides a useful interpretative for understanding how responsibilities are redistributed across governance levels while capacities for strategic coordination, information management, monitoring, and accountability remain embedded within state governance arrangements.

From a broader perspective, the Portuguese case may contribute to the ongoing international debates about the transformation of governance in the twenty-first century. The findings suggest that decentralization reforms may expand local responsibilities while strengthening central coordination capacities. In this regard, these reforms contribute to the construction and institutionalization of new governance arrangements.

More broadly, the study indicates the analytical utility of analyzing decentralization through the lenses of policy instrumentation, governance infrastructures, and multilevel coordination. In doing so, it adds to a growing literature that seeks to understand how contemporary states are increasingly governing through complex regulatory arrangements that blur traditional distinctions between centralization and decentralization in the governance of public services.

Finally, the Portuguese case suggests that contemporary decentralization reforms can be fruitfully analyzed not only in terms of the formal redistribution of competencies but also in terms of the governance architectures that support them. By focusing on the interplay among discourse, policy instruments, territorial coordination, and emerging informational infrastructures, the study contributes to broader debates on the reconfiguration of public management in contexts characterized by multilevel governance, digital governance, and increasingly data-informed forms of state steering. The Portuguese case also provides an initial basis for interpreting recent institutional developments through the perspective of Accountable Digital Governance, while recognizing that this interpretation requires further empirical investigation.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, C.R.; Methodology, C.R.; Validation, C.R. and A.G.; Formal analysis, C.R.; Investigation, C.R.; Resources, C.R.; Data curation, C.R.; Writing—original draft, C.R.; Writing—review & editing, C.R. and A.G.; Supervision, A.N.-M. and A.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data are based on publicly available policy documents. The documentary sources analyzed in this study are publicly available from the official institutions and repositories cited throughout the manuscript. The documentary corpus is described in Appendix A, and all documentary sources are fully referenced in the manuscript. No new datasets were generated during the current study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

AGSE	Agency for the Management of the Education System
AM	Metropolitan area
CCDR	Regional Coordination and Development Commissions
CCDR C	Regional Coordination and Development Commissions—Center
CE	Council of Schools
CIM	Intermunicipal communities
CME	Municipal Education Council
CNE	National Education Council
DGEEC	Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência
DGEstE	Direção-Geral dos Estabelecimentos escolares
IGeFE	Instituto de Gestão Financeira da Educação, I.P.
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PEL	Local Educational Projects
PIICIE	Integrated and Innovative Plan for Reducing Academic Underachievement
PIPSE	Inter-Municipal Programs to Promote Academic Success

Appendix A. Documentary Corpus

This appendix provides an overview of the documentary corpus analyzed in the study. It identifies the principal documents included in the analysis, their role in the analytical process, and their contribution to the three analytical dimensions (Promise, Reality, and Transformation). The appendix supports methodological transparency by clarifying how different types of documentary evidence were mobilized to examine the reconfiguration of educational governance and public management in Portugal.

Table A1. Documentary corpus overview, analytical function, and relevance to the research question.

Document Type	Source/ Institution	Time Period	Analytical Function and Relevance to the Research Question	Analytical Dimension(s)
National Legislation: Decree-Law No. 137/2012, amending the legal framework governing the autonomy, administration, and management of public pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools (Ministério da Educação e da Ciência, 2012); Law No. 75/2013, establishing the Legal Framework for Local Authorities (RJAL) (Assembleia da República, 2013); Law No. 50/2018, establishing the Framework Law for the Transfer of Competences to Local Authorities and Intermunicipal Entities (Assembleia da República, 2018); Decree-Law No. 21/2019, implementing the transfer of competences to municipal and intermunicipal authorities in the field of education (Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2019)	Portuguese Parliament; council of Ministers	2012–2015	Identification of formal competencies, transfers, governance arrangements, accountability structures, and institutional reforms associated with educational decentralization	Promise; Reality; Transformation

Table A1. Cont.

Document Type	Source/ Institution	Time Period	Analytical Function and Relevance to the Research Question	Analytical Dimension(s)
International and National Policy Reports: OECD (2019, 2020) reports on decentralization and governance; Conselho Nacional de Educação (2019, 2025, 2026) reports and advisory recommendations; Conselho das Escolas (2017, 2020, 2022) opinions and recommendations; State-commissioned diagnostic and evaluation reports (Seabra et al., 2012 ; Veiga et al., 2026)	OECD; National Education Council (CNE); Council of Schools (CE); Government	2012–2016	Analysis of policy narratives, reform rationalities, governance evaluations, and assessments of decentralization implementation	Promise; Reality; Transformation
Accountability and Evaluation Documents: Tribunal de Contas de Portugal (2023, 2024) reports	Portuguese Court of Auditors reports	2023–2024	Examination of implementation challenges, monitoring practices, accountability mechanisms, and governance performance	Reality; Transformation
Planning Documents and Technical Guidelines: Educational Charters and Municipal Strategic Educational Plans (PEEM/PEL) publicly available during the period of analysis	Municipalities; Ministry of education agencies (DGEEC, DGEstE, IGeFE)	2012–2026	Analysis of territorial planning, school network organization, and the standardization of local governance coordination	Reality
Inter-administrative Contracts: Contracts signed between municipalities and school clusters publicly available (e.g., Espinho, Gondomar, and São João da Madeira)	Municipalities and school clusters)	2019–2024	Examination of contractual governance arrangements, delegation of competences, monitoring procedures, and accountability obligations	Reality
Funding and Program Instruments: PIICIE/Educ@RA, PIPSE, and associated documentation	Regional coordination Commissions (CCDRC); CIMs	2016–2024	Analysis of funding conditionalities, performance-oriented governance mechanisms, and policy implementation arrangements	Reality

Table A1. Cont.

Document Type	Source/ Institution	Time Period	Analytical Function and Relevance to the Research Question	Analytical Dimension(s)
Institutional Governance Documents: AGSE founding legislation and statutes and CCDR legislative framework as established in Decree-Law No. 36/2023; Decree-Law No. 99/2025; Decree-Law No. 117/2025 (Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2023, 2025a, 2025b); Ordinance No. 296-A/2025/1 (Finanças e Educação, Ciência e Inovação, 2025)	AGSE; CCDR; Government	2023–2025	Examination of coordination structures, digital governance arrangements, and emerging infrastructural forms of state steering	Promise; Reality; Transformation

Source: Authors' compilation.

Appendix B. Cross-Cutting Governance Categories and Subcategories

This appendix presents the cross-cutting governance categories and subcategories used to support the documentary analysis. While the three analytical dimensions (Promise, Reality, and Transformation) structure the overall analytical framework presented in Table 3, the categories included in this appendix were used to identify recurring governance patterns across the documentary corpus. These categories supported the coding and interpretation of recurring governance patterns identified across the documentary corpus.

Table A2. Cross-cutting governance categories and subcategories used to support the coding and interpretation of governance arrangements, policy instruments, and coordination mechanisms within the documentary corpus.

Cross-Cutting Category	Subcategories
Multilevel Governance	Redistribution of competencies; vertical coordination; horizontal coordination; intergovernmental relations; multilevel policy implementation
Policy Instrumentation	Policy instruments (planning, contractual, funding, and monitoring instruments)
Territorial Governance	Educational Charters; local planning; territorial coordination; intermunicipal cooperation
Evaluative Governance	Indicators; audits; reporting systems; accountability and performance-monitoring mechanisms
Collaborative Governance	Partnerships; networks; stakeholder participation; inter-institutional cooperation
Digital Governance	Platforms; information systems; interoperability; data management; digital coordination
Infrastructural Governance	Administrative reorganization; coordination architectures; governance infrastructures; system integration
School Autonomy	Distribution of decision-making authority; governance tensions; institutional responsibilities; relations between schools and municipalities

Source: Author's elaboration based on [Bacchi \(2009\)](#), [Ball \(1994\)](#), and [Lascoumes and Le Galès \(2007\)](#).

Appendix C. Governance Instruments and Coordination Mechanisms in the Portuguese Educational Decentralization

This appendix maps and synthesizes the main governance instruments and coordination mechanisms identified throughout the documentary analysis. Rather than constituting the analytical framework itself, these instruments represent the principal governance arrangements through which educational decentralization is operationalized across different governance scales. It illustrates how contemporary educational decentralization is structured through a combination of regulatory, contractual, evaluative, collaborative, and infrastructural mechanisms.

Table A3. Governance instruments and coordination mechanisms identified in the documentary corpus and their contribution to educational governance, multilevel coordination, and public management transformation.

Instrument	Governance Logic	Governance Scale	Main Function
Framework legislation and competencies-transfer regime (<i>Assembleia da República, 2018; Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2019</i>)	Regulatory governance	National	Redistribution of competencies
Educational Charters	Planning governance	Municipal	Educational planning
Funding and innovation programs (e.g., PIICIE/Educ@RA/PIPSE)	Collaborative governance	Intermunicipal	Territorial coordination and educational innovation
Inter-administrative contracts	Contractual governance	Municipal-School	Delegation of competencies, resource allocation, reporting obligations, monitoring and accountability
OECD recommendations	Soft governance	Multilevel	Policy orientation and benchmarking
CNE reports and recommendations	Deliberative and advisory governance	National	Policy evaluation, strategic reflection and consensus-building
Council of Schools recommendations	Participatory and representative governance	National-School level	Representation of school interests and school autonomy
Portuguese Court of Auditors reports	Evaluative governance	National	Accountability and performance monitoring
CCDR coordination mechanisms	Territorial governance	Regional	Intergovernmental articulation and policy coordination
AGSE	Infrastructural governance	National	Information management, digital coordination, monitoring, and system coordination

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the documentary corpus analyzed in the study.

Appendix D. Illustrative Excerpt of the Coding Matrix Mapping Textual Features to Analytical Dimensions

This appendix presents an illustrative extraction matrix demonstrating how the theoretical categories of the analytical framework (Promise, Reality, and Transformation) were

operationalized during the deductive coding process. While Appendix A provides the exhaustive mapping of the entire documentary corpus, Appendix D, through Table A4, exemplifies how specific textual features, discursive markers, and policy indicators, such as legislative preambles, contractual clauses, and technical guidelines, were identified in the documents and assigned to their respective analytical dimensions.

Table A4. Illustrative excerpt of the coding matrix mapping textual features to analytical dimensions.

Analytical Dimension	Category/Indicator (cf. Table 3)	Document from the Corpus	Illustrative Textual Feature/Evidence Extracted
Promise	Modernization; efficiency; proximity to citizens.	Preamble Decree-Law No. 21/2019 (Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2019)	The text frames competencies transfer as an effort to “modernize the Portuguese state” and transform its operating model to “respond more efficiently and effectively to citizens’ needs”.
Promise	Territorial governance; innovation; local empowerment.	Law No. 50/2018 (Assembleia da República, 2018); OECD (2020)	Documents portray municipalities as possessing greater territorial knowledge, being framed as “strategic actors capable of promoting innovation, improving service delivery, and fostering greater responsiveness to local challenges”.
Reality	Strategic planning; technical standardization	Official technical guidelines (Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência et al., 2021)	The guidelines condition municipal planning by imposing the “use of common indicators, standardized planning methodologies, and rigid technical procedures” for school network organization.
Reality	Contractual logics; reporting obligations; metrics.	Inter-administrative contracts (Municipalities and School Clusters)	The clauses do not merely delegate operational power; they strictly determine “reporting obligations, monitoring procedures, financial responsibilities, and accountability requirements”.
Reality	Funding conditionalities; evaluation mechanisms.	CCDRC (2016, 2020, 2024)	Program regulations dictate that access to financial resources is strictly linked to “predefined goals, performance indicators, monitoring requirements, and reporting procedures”.
Transformation	Decentralized centralism; governance tensions.	Conselho das Escolas (2017)	The opinion explicitly warns that the model might increase municipal responsibilities while limiting school autonomy, constituting a form of “decentralization <i>a contrario sensu</i> ”.
Transformation	Evaluative governance; recentralization via instruments.	Article 15 Decree-Law No. 21/2019 (Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2019)	The article establishes the legal obligation to revise Educational Charters whenever “local planning deviates from the principles, objectives, and technical criteria set at the national level”.
Transformation	Infrastructural integration; augmented bureaucracy.	Decree-Law No. 99/2025 (Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2025a)	The legal framework explicitly mandates the new agency (AGSE) to “build, operate, and maintain the educational system’s integrated technological infrastructure”, reinforcing central oversight through information flows.

Source: Authors’ translation and elaboration based on the documentary corpus analyzed in the study.

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