

Introduction

Schools in various parts of the world adopt plans or projects to improve the quality of school processes and students' learning (Bell, 1998; Leithwood et al., 2006; Mbugua & Rarieya, 2014). Generally, schools' improvement efforts are formalized in a school plan (a document), which is conceptualized through a formal planning process (Strunk et al., 2016). Similar to other countries (Ali, 2012, 2018; Davies, 2003, 2004; Eacott, 2008; Strunk et al., 2016), in Portugal, several school reform policies have mandated formal planning as a means of change and improvement. For instance, Portuguese schools were recently asked to elaborate and implement Strategic Action Plans (SAPs) to improve student success (Ministry of Education, 2016). Despite the widespread use of plans, little evidence exists about the quality of school strategic plans concerning both their processes and outcomes (e.g., Leithwood et al., 2006; Strunk et al., 2016), and this is also true within the Portuguese educational system. Prevalent planning practices in schools are often short-term, usually based on the immediate needs of the school, and the main focus has been on the distribution of duties and resources as well as control budget and accountability (Mbugua & Rarieya, 2014). School improvement plans appear to be quite similar in terms of structure and content, typically with a listing of goals, objectives, and strategies (Meyers & Hitt, 2018). Few studies have examined the quality of these school plans, their translation into changed or improved practices, and the related outcomes over time (Strunk et al., 2016). Furthermore, research on strategic planning has identified fewer positive findings, supporting the idea that "the mere act of generating strategic plans in school reforms is not enough" (Strunk et al., 2016, pp. 263-264). Indeed, it is crucial to deepen our knowledge regarding the planning and implementing processes for high-quality school strategic plans for research, practical and political implications. The main focus of the present study is to analyse school improvement processes (viz. planning and implementing) in Portuguese schools. Specifically, it is intended to analyse the critical processes of strategic planning and action related to SAPs. A key element for highquality plans is the active and meaningful involvement and commitment of teachers and other school stakeholders (Garza, Drysdale, Gurr, Jacobson & Merchant, 2014; Hajisoteriou, Karousiou & Angelides, 2018; Louis & Lee, 2016; Strunk et al., 2016). This study is especially noteworthy because it appears that a limited number of studies have been conducted so far on teachers' or other stakeholders' participation in strategic planning in Portuguese schools. International research as well as Portuguese political guidelines have supported and reinforced the need for teachers' and other stakeholders' participation in this process as a condition for successful action (e.g., Garza et al., 2014; Hajisoteriou et al., 2018; Ismail et al., 2018; Labée et al., 2015; Louis & Lee, 2016; Machado, 2017; Ministry of Education, 2016; Myende & Bhengu, 2015; Strunk et al., 2016). Therefore, it is important to understand the processes and results of SAPs in Portuguese schools and, specifically, teachers' participation in decision making and plans. In this paper, the authors argue that school improvement and strategic action cannot be established without the participation of key school actors. The following sections briefly conceptualize the importance of teachers' participation in school action plans and present an empirical study related to strategic action processes in Portuguese schools.

Teachers' participation in strategic action plans

Teachers' participation in decision processes is not a new topic in educational literature (cf. Muijs & Harris, 2003; Pashiardis, 1994; Smylie, 1992). Both empirical research literature and international educational policies have strengthened the importance of teachers' roles in

decision making extending their involvement in the overall decision process. Several authors support the relevance of teachers' participation in decision making, thereby indicating that strategic planning is a joint and collaborative process (e.g., Cheng, 2011; Davies, 2004; Eacott, 2008; Friend, 2000; Leithwooth et al., 2006; Mbugua & Rarieya, 2014; Reynolds et al., 2014; Slater, 2006). The collaboration of those involved in strategic planning seems to be a prerequisite both for successful planning and implementation (Ismail et al., 2018; Mbugua & Rarieya, 2014; Labée et al., 2015; Myende & Bhengu, 2015). This is related to the growing arguments that suggest that collaborative practices, embedded in the on-going behaviour of teachers, affect school improvement (Carpenter, 2018; Hajisoteriou et al., 2018; Ismail et al., 2018; Louis & Lee, 2016). Hajisoteriou et al. (2018) "claim that collaboration is not an adequate condition for school improvement" (p.16) but instead "is the cornerstone of school improvement in culturally diverse schools" (p. 17). School improvement requires systematic and interactive processes of working together, both for planning and implementing strategic action. One important question to explore is related to the factors that promote teachers' participation and collaboration (Anjum, Islam, Choudhuri & Saha, 2021; Mbugua & Rarieya, 2014; Wadesango, 2012). In a qualitative study, Mbugua and Rarieya (2014) identified several factors that facilitate teachers' involvement in planning: (i) knowledge about the content and process of strategic planning; (ii) effective communication; and (iii) collaboration between stakeholders. On the other hand, top-down decisions, lack of autonomy, lack of knowledge and expertise about strategic planning, lack of vision and absence of shared experiences, individualized approaches and focus on formal aspects of planning were found to be factors that hinder teachers' full engagement in the strategic planning process. Additionally, other authors have highlighted the importance of creating time and opportunities for collaboration and the need to reinforce and involve teachers in collaboration processes (Clarke, Triggs & Nielsen, 2014; Friend, 2000; Sehgal, Nambudiri & Mishra, 2017; Slater, 2006; Wadesango, 2010). Indeed, collaboration is challenging and must be intentionally promoted and supported.

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