

Leadership Perspectives in Practicing School Autonomy: A Case Study in the Autonomous Region of Madeira

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Abstract

This study analyses leadership perspectives in the exercise of school autonomy in the Autonomous Region of Madeira, Portugal. It examines the contradiction between what is legally prescribed and what is effectively practiced, emphasizing the role of leadership as a mediator between regulation and practice. Based on a qualitative case study, data were collected through document analysis and interviews with members of the school leadership and teachers. Findings reveal the coexistence of *decreed autonomy*, conditioned by hierarchical structures, and *constructed autonomy*, emerging from collaborative practices and distributed leadership. Drawing on Nils Brunsson's theory of organizational hypocrisy and Anísio Teixeira's democratic educational philosophy, the study argues that autonomy is not a static legal status but a relational and political process dependent on the ability of schools and their leaders to create authentic spaces of democratic participation.

Keywords: School Autonomy. Leadership. Decentralization. Democratic Management. Madeira. Organizational Hypocrisy.

1 Introduction

The reflection on school autonomy in Portugal remains a relevant and challenging topic, especially when analysed in light of the country's democratic trajectory since the 1974 Revolution. Throughout the last five decades, successive governments

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have declared autonomy as a strategic principle for improving the quality of Education and strengthening democratic management. Yet, as several authors have emphasized (Barroso, 1996a, 1996b, 2004; Lima, 2020; Carvalho, Fraga, Almeida, 2024; Lima *et al.*, 2024), autonomy has often been more a discourse than a practice, limited by the persistence of centralized and bureaucratic forms of regulation.

In the Portuguese educational system, autonomy has oscillated between two poles: decentralization, associated with participation and local decision-making, and centralization, linked to administrative control and the standardization of procedures. The coexistence of these dynamics has produced what Barroso (1996a) termed the tension between *decreed autonomy* - that which is formally established in law - and *constructed autonomy*, which is exercised daily by schools as they reinterpret and adapt official prescriptions. This tension has been particularly visible in the context of the Autonomous Region of Madeira, where regional legislation allows for differentiated governance models that preserve the principle of collegiality.

Since the 1970s, Madeira has sought to consolidate its own educational identity within the framework of regional autonomy. Through Decree-Laws 4/2000/M (Portugal, 2000) and 21/2006/M, the regional government defined a model of school management based on shared leadership and democratic participation. Unlike the mainland, which adopted the unipersonal *Director model* in 2008 (Portugal, 2008), Madeiran schools retained collective management bodies such as the Educational Community Council and the Pedagogical Council. This institutional design sustains a culture of participation that links autonomy to community engagement and democratic accountability.

However, despite this distinctive framework, there remains a gap between what is prescribed in legislation and what is effectively practiced in schools. This discrepancy, between the autonomy that is *decreed* and the autonomy that is *lived*, constitutes the central analytical focus of this study. As highlighted in the original research from which this article derives, leadership plays a decisive role in mediating this gap. Leaders act as interpreters and facilitators, negotiating between regulatory norms and the realities of school life.

The purpose of this article is to analyse leadership perspectives in the exercise of school autonomy within the Madeiran context. Specifically, it aims to:

- a) examine how school leaders and teachers understand and enact autonomy in their daily practices;
- b) identify the tensions between legal prescriptions and the practices that emerge in the school community; and
- c) discuss how leadership functions as a mediating force between external control and internal agency.

To address these questions, the study draws on a qualitative case study of a public school in the Autonomous Region of Madeira, combining interviews and document analysis. The theoretical framework integrates the concept of *organizational hypocrisy* (Brunsson, 1989), which helps explain the disconnection between discourse and action, and the democratic educational thought of Anísio Teixeira (1962), who argued that autonomy and democracy are inseparable dimensions of education. As Barroso (1996a) classically distinguished, there is a distance between legal prescription and institutional practice.

The article thus seeks to contribute to the understanding of how autonomy is constructed and negotiated in practice, demonstrating that its realization depends not only on regulatory frameworks but on the leadership capacity to transform legal provisions into spaces of genuine participation and shared responsibility.

2 Theoretical Framework

Understanding school autonomy requires examining how Educational policy, institutional structures, and leadership practices interact in shaping decision-making processes and school culture. This section outlines the conceptual framework supporting the analysis, structured around four dimensions: (1) the evolution from *decreed* to *constructed* autonomy; (2) the mediating role of leadership; (3) the theoretical contribution of organizational hypocrisy; and (4) the democratic legacy of Anísio Teixeira.

2.1 From Decreed to Constructed Autonomy

The debate on autonomy in Portuguese Education has long reflected a tension between legal prescription and institutional practice. As Barroso (1996a) classically distinguished, *decreed autonomy* refers to the powers formally granted by law, while *constructed autonomy* emerges from the actual practices, decisions, and negotiations that occur within schools. In this sense, autonomy is not merely a legal condition but a social process shaped by interactions, constraints, and agency.

Despite decades of reform, Portuguese schools continue to experience this contradiction. Legal frameworks such as Decree-Laws 43/89 and 115-A/98 introduced the principles of participatory management, but central control over resources, staffing, and evaluation remained largely intact. Afonso (1998) argues that these reforms produced “regulated autonomy,” wherein schools were invited to act autonomously while being simultaneously monitored through detailed bureaucratic procedures.

In the Autonomous Region of Madeira, however, regional legislation created a slightly different trajectory. Laws such as Decree-Law 4/2000/M (Portugal, 2000) and 21/2006/M institutionalized participatory structures, maintaining the Educational Community Council as the central decision-making body. This arrangement reflects what Lima *et al.* (2024) describe as “the persistence of democratic governance in peripheral contexts,” where local engagement becomes both a symbolic and practical form of resistance to managerial centralization.

Autonomy, therefore, exists along a continuum between regulation and freedom. It is decreed by the law but constructed by the practices of those who interpret and implement it. Schools become arenas of negotiation between policy discourse and educational action.

2.2 Leadership and the Mediation of Autonomy

Leadership represents the key mediating force between autonomy as discourse and autonomy as practice. As Bolívar (2000) emphasizes, leadership is not a neutral administrative activity but a political and pedagogical act that shapes collective understanding and organizational direction. The leader’s task is not merely to execute policies but to interpret and adapt them to the local context.

Research by Leithwood *et al.* (2006) identifies distributed leadership as central to school improvement, especially in systems pursuing autonomy. In this model, authority is shared among teachers and community actors, allowing decision-making to emerge from collaboration rather than command. Within the Portuguese context, this form of leadership often clashes with hierarchical administrative cultures that prioritize compliance.

In the Madeiran context, leadership entails navigating between regional regulations and school-based initiatives. Silva and Fraga (2022) demonstrate that school leaders in Madeira act as interpreters of policy, mediating between legal frameworks and the daily realities of teachers and students. Similarly, Fraga *et al.* (2022) highlights that leadership within the Autonomy and Curricular Flexibility Project

in Portugal operates as a dynamic process of negotiation between centralized norms and localized pedagogical innovation. This process reinforces the idea that autonomy is not simply granted but continually constructed through interaction, reflection, and shared responsibility.

Evidence from Madeira also indicates that leadership practices perceived as most effective for sustaining autonomy emphasize enabling others to act and encouraging collective commitment (Costa, Bento, 2015), aligning with the view that autonomy is constructed through collaboration rather than command.

As Lima (2020) notes, the capacity for schools to act autonomously depends less on the formal scope of authority and more on the willingness of leaders to assume political responsibility. Leadership, in this perspective, is inseparable from democracy.

2.3 The Concept of Organizational Hypocrisy

The contradictions between policy discourse and institutional behaviour can be better understood through Nils Brunsson's (1989) concept of organizational hypocrisy. Brunsson argues that organizations maintain legitimacy by separating what they say, decide, and do. Rather than reflecting deceit, this separation allows institutions to cope with conflicting external expectations and internal realities.

In Education, this theory helps explain why schools may adopt the rhetoric of innovation and participation while reproducing bureaucratic practices. Lima (in Brunsson, 2006) brings the concept into the educational field, arguing that "organizational hypocrisy" can operate both as a constraint and as a resource in schools facing simultaneous demands for conformity and creativity.

In the case of Madeira, this analytical lens helps interpret how schools balance adherence to regional legislation with the pursuit of local projects and pedagogical initiatives. Schools engage in what Brunsson calls "talk-action decoupling," whereby compliance with formal norms coexists with creative reinterpretation of those norms in practice. Leadership plays a pivotal role in managing this balance, turning contradiction into adaptive capacity.

2.4 The Democratic Tradition and Anísio Teixeira's Legacy

The notion of autonomy as a foundation for democracy has deep roots in Lusophone educational thought. In Brazil, Anísio Teixeira (1962) argued that democracy cannot exist without educational institutions that cultivate freedom, participation, and

collective responsibility. Schools, he claimed, are “laboratories of democracy,” where citizens learn to deliberate, cooperate, and assume responsibility for the common good.

Portuguese educational reformers after 1974 shared similar ideals. The Basic Law of the Educational System (Portugal, 1986) established democratic management as a guiding principle of public Education. However, as Lima *et al.* (2024) observe, subsequent managerial reforms gradually displaced participatory governance with technocratic control mechanisms focused on accountability and efficiency.

Revisiting Teixeira’s thought alongside Brunsson’s theoretical framework allows for a richer understanding of the paradoxes of autonomy. While Teixeira envisioned autonomy as the practical expression of democracy, Brunsson helps explain how institutional contradictions can both hinder and sustain it. The convergence of these perspectives provides a valuable interpretive tool for analyzing the dynamics of leadership and school governance in the Autonomous Region of Madeira.

3 Methodology

In order to explore the complexities of school autonomy within the context of Madeira, this study employs a qualitative case study approach. The following section outlines the research design, which includes the selection of participants, data collection methods, and the analytical framework used to address the research questions.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2015), appropriate for exploring complex educational phenomena within their real contexts. The goal is not statistical generalization but analytical insight into how autonomy is interpreted and enacted within a specific institutional and political environment.

A qualitative and interpretive approach was chosen because it enables the identification of meanings, values, and contradictions that shape how leadership and autonomy coexist in school governance. As Lima (2020) emphasizes, school management is simultaneously an educational and political process; therefore, understanding it requires methods capable of capturing subjectivity, dialogue, and institutional culture.

The case study allows for a detailed and contextualized description of practices and discourses, producing knowledge that is transferable to similar contexts rather than generalizable to all schools.

3.2 Case Selection

The case analysed is a public school in the Autonomous Region of Madeira, chosen because of its recognised history of pedagogical innovation and participation in regional initiatives promoting curricular autonomy and teacher collaboration.

The selection followed criterion-based sampling (Patton, 2015), guided by three main criteria:

- a) the school's involvement in regional program of curricular autonomy and flexibility;
- b) the diversity of its staff in terms of teaching experience and leadership roles; and
- c) its geographical representativeness within the regional educational network.

Although only one school was studied, it serves as a paradigmatic case that illustrates the dynamics of autonomy within Madeira's specific regulatory and cultural framework.

To ensure compliance with ethical and legal standards, including the General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (GDPR), the school's name and identifying details have been omitted to guarantee full anonymity.

3.3 Participants

The study involved twelve participants, distributed across three functional levels of the educational system:

1. three members of the school's management and leadership bodies (President and members of the Management Council);
2. eight Head Teachers (Class Directors) responsible for coordinating class-level pedagogical activities; and
3. one representative from the Regional Educational Administration, interviewed to provide a complementary institutional perspective.

This composition allowed for an in-depth understanding of how school autonomy and leadership are perceived and enacted at different decision-making levels, from regional governance to pedagogical coordination and classroom practice.

Participants were selected using criterion-based sampling (Patton, 2015), ensuring diversity in experience, disciplinary background, and years of service (Table 1). All participants provided informed consent and agreed to anonymized publication of their views.

Table 1 – Characterization of Interviewees

Participant Code	Position/Function	Gender	Age (Years)	Years of Experience	Area of Teaching/Responsibility
P1	School Leadership - President of the Management Council	Male	56	32	Geography
P2	School Leadership - Management Council Member	Male	47	26	Physical Education and Sport
P3	School Leadership -Management Council Member	Female	56	30	Philosophy
P4	Head Teacher (Class Director)	Female	50	27	Physics and Chemistry
P5	Head Teacher (Class Director)	Female	45	23	Mathematics
P6	Head Teacher (Class Director)	Female	45	22	Mathematics
P7	Head Teacher (Class Director)	Female	51	31	Physics and Chemistry
P8	Head Teacher (Class Director)	Female	50	30	English
P9	Head Teacher (Class Director)	Female	42	16	Chemistry
P10	Head Teacher (Class Director)	Female	42	16	Physical Education
P11	Head Teacher (Class Director)	Male	41	18	Geography
P12	Regional Educational Administration	Male	52	-	PhD in Educational Psychology

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on interview data (2025)

The diversity of roles represented in the sample provided an opportunity to understand how leadership and autonomy are perceived from multiple organizational levels.

3.4 Data Collection

The research used three complementary methods of data collection:

1. Document analysis, focusing on the school's Educational Project (PEE), Annual Plans, and Internal Regulations to identify formal structures and regulatory frameworks related to autonomy.
2. Semi-structured interviews, which explored participants' perceptions of autonomy, leadership, and participation. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, was audio-recorded, and later transcribed verbatim.
3. Field notes and informal observations, made during visits and meetings, which allowed for the contextualization of institutional dynamics and relational aspects of leadership.

The interviews were conducted using an interview guide organized around three thematic axes: i) representations of autonomy and centralization; ii) experiences of participation and leadership; and iii) perceived constraints and opportunities for democratic management.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were processed using content analysis (Bardin, 2016), carried out in three stages:

1. Pre-analysis - repeated reading of the material to identify preliminary ideas;
2. Exploration of material - coding and classification of units of meaning;
3. Treatment and interpretation - synthesis of categories and construction of analytical relationships.

The coding process integrated both deductive and inductive logics to ensure analytical consistency and openness to the field. Deductive categories were derived from the theoretical framework, particularly from studies on school autonomy

and leadership, while inductive codes emerged from participants’ narratives. As shown in Table 2, the deductive categories included decreed autonomy, constructed autonomy and participatory leadership, reflecting concepts grounded in the literature (Barroso, 1996a; Lima, 2020; Fraga *et al.*, 2022). Inductive categories such as strategic compliance and adaptive mediation arose directly from the empirical material, capturing how actors interpreted and negotiated the tensions between regulation and autonomy in practice.

To enhance reliability, all interviews were independently coded by two researchers, and divergences were discussed until full agreement was reached.

Table 2 – Content Analysis Matrix

Category	Description	Illustrative Quote	Theoretical Reference
Decreed Autonomy	Autonomy as prescribed by law, limited by bureaucracy	"Autonomy is written in documents but not in our daily decisions."	Barroso (1996a, 1996b, 2004)
Constructed Autonomy	Autonomy built through collaboration and local initiative	"We create autonomy when we decide together how to act."	Lima (2020)
Participatory Leadership	Leadership fostering dialogue and trust	"The director listens; decisions are not imposed but discussed."	Bolívar (2000); Fraga <i>et al.</i> (2022)
Organizational Hypocrisy	Coexistence of autonomy discourse and control practices	"We follow the rules but adapt them to make them workable."	Brunsson (1989; 2006); Lima (preface in Brunsson, 2006)
Democratic Responsibility	Autonomy as shared accountability	"We are responsible for the success of the school, not just for following rules."	Teixeira (1962); Costa and Bento (2015)
Strategic Compliance	Selective conformity to regulations as a means to preserve room for innovation and contextual adaptation.	"We comply on paper, but in practice we adapt to what our students need."	Barroso (2004); Brunsson (1989)
Adaptive Mediation	Leadership practice of interpreting and translating regulations into feasible, context-sensitive actions that sustain autonomy.	"Our role is to make the rules work for our reality."	Fraga <i>et al.</i> (2022); Bolívar (2000)

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on interview data (2025)

This process produced a nuanced interpretation of the data, revealing how participants articulated their experiences of autonomy within a complex web of expectations and constraints.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The research complied with the ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. All participants signed consent forms authorizing data collection and use for academic purposes.

In compliance with Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (GDPR), interview transcripts were anonymized, and identifying details were removed. Data are securely stored in encrypted files. The anonymized materials are not publicly shared to preserve privacy but may be accessed upon justified request to the corresponding author.

3.7 Limitations

As a single-case qualitative study, the results do not aim for generalization but for analytical and theoretical insight. The specificity of the Madeiran context, marked by insularity and regional governance, limits transferability but enriches understanding of autonomy in decentralized systems.

Another limitation concerns the reliance on self-reported data. However, triangulation between interviews, documents, and field notes mitigated this limitation, ensuring consistency and depth in the analysis.

4 Context: The Autonomous Region of Madeira

To understand the dynamics of autonomy within the Madeiran educational system, it is essential to consider the historical and political factors that have shaped the region's governance and educational policies. The following section provides an overview of the historical and political framework that underpins the concept of autonomy in Madeira, highlighting key developments that have influenced its educational landscape.

4.1 Historical and Political Framework

The Autonomous Region of Madeira (RAM) is an archipelago situated in the North Atlantic, approximately 900 km southwest of mainland Portugal. Following the 1974 democratic revolution, Madeira acquired political autonomy through

the approval of its Autonomous Statute (1976), which recognised the region's right to self-government within the Portuguese Republic.

This autonomy grants the regional government legislative and administrative powers in areas of specific interest, including Education, which is managed by the Regional Secretariat for Education, Science and Technology (SRE). While the Ministry of Education defines national policy guidelines, Madeira adapts these directives to its own geographic, demographic, and cultural conditions.

Over the past five decades, Education in Madeira has evolved as both a regional identity project and a strategy for social inclusion. The region's policies have emphasized educational democratization, curricular adaptation, and local participation, reflecting the broader ideals of the April Revolution.

Unlike mainland Portugal, Madeira has retained a collegial model of school management, based on collective decision-making bodies such as the Educational Community Council and Pedagogical Council. This model symbolizes the region's commitment to participatory governance, which remains a distinctive feature of its educational system.

4.2 Demographic and Educational Overview

According to the Regional Directorate of Statistics of Madeira (Direção Regional de Estatística da Madeira, 2024), the archipelago has a resident population of approximately 259,400 inhabitants.

The Education system serves nearly 39,000 students across 140 educational institutions, employing around 5,700 teachers. The schooling rate for children aged 6 to 17 exceeds 98%, and the early school leaving rate is among the lowest in Portugal (below 6%). Madeira also demonstrates strong performance in educational attainment, with an increasing proportion of students completing Secondary Education and entering higher education (Secretaria Regional de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia, 2025).

The region's Education network includes preschools, basic and secondary schools, vocational training centers, and institutions specializing in arts and music. Educational policies emphasize inclusive Education, digital literacy, and alignment with regional labour market needs, ensuring that schools contribute to both personal development and community sustainability.

4.3 Governance Structure in Schools

The Madeiran model of school governance differs significantly from the managerial model in mainland Portugal. It operates through a collective management system, grounded in democratic participation and co-responsibility.

Schools are governed by four statutory bodies:

1. Educational Community Council (*Conselho da Comunidade Educativa*): a strategic body that includes representatives of teachers, parents, students, staff, and local authorities. It defines the educational project and approves the main policy orientations.
2. Executive Council (*Conselho Executivo*): responsible for administrative coordination and day-to-day management.
3. Pedagogical Council (*Conselho Pedagógico*): supervises curriculum implementation, evaluation, and innovation.
4. Administrative Council (*Conselho Administrativo*): manages financial resources.

This structure fosters the idea that autonomy is not an individual prerogative but a collective responsibility shared among the educational community. As Carvalho, Fraga and Almeida (2024) note, Madeira's insistence on collegiality represents a form of "institutional memory of democracy" within an increasingly centralized national landscape.

4.4 Regional Educational Policy and Leadership

Since the 1990s, Madeira has implemented educational policies aligned with curricular flexibility, teacher collaboration, and school-based innovation. The region adapted the national Project for Curricular Autonomy and Flexibility (*Projeto de Autonomia e Flexibilidade Curricular* - PAFC) to its local reality, allowing schools to design interdisciplinary learning projects that integrate regional culture, environment, and citizenship Education.

Leadership plays a central role in enacting these policies. In Madeira, school leaders are expected not only to ensure compliance with regulations but also to mediate between policy and practice, translating abstract principles into local pedagogical action. This dual function requires balancing accountability

with creativity, maintaining adherence to regional legislation while fostering professional participation.

Studies by Silva and Fraga (2022) and Lima (2020) highlight that Madeiran school leaders often act as interpreters of autonomy, developing organizational cultures based on collaboration and mutual trust. Their leadership is characterized by an emphasis on dialogue, shared vision, and adaptability, traits essential to maintaining the region's democratic educational ethos.

4.5 Challenges of Geography and Scale

Madeira's insular condition introduces distinctive challenges to educational governance. The dispersion of schools across multiple municipalities and small rural communities creates logistical difficulties in resource distribution, teacher mobility, and professional development.

Moreover, the relatively small scale of the educational system, while facilitating close coordination, can also lead to limited opportunities for innovation and professional rotation. Leaders and teachers often work in long-term stable teams, which strengthens collegiality but may hinder renewal.

Nevertheless, the region benefits from a strong sense of community identity and interinstitutional cooperation, which compensate for these limitations. The challenge for policy and leadership lies in sustaining this collaborative culture while adapting to new demands related to digitalization, evaluation, and transnational educational frameworks.

5 Results and Discussion

The results of the study reveal a dynamic and sometimes contradictory picture of how autonomy is experienced and constructed within the selected school. While the Madeiran educational framework provides a unique environment that formally protects collegial governance and local participation, the practices observed and described by participants show the persistence of hierarchical and bureaucratic patterns. The analysis produced three central themes: (1) the endurance of decreed autonomy; (2) the emergence of constructed autonomy through collaborative leadership; and (3) the coexistence of compliance and innovation, interpreted through Brunsson's (1989) concept of organizational hypocrisy.

5.1 Decreed Autonomy and Persistent Centralization

Interviewees acknowledged that school autonomy exists in principle, but its scope is often restricted by external controls. Several participants referred to a sense of “supervised freedom,” where decisions are subject to regional directives and procedural requirements.

As one Department Coordinator observed: “We have autonomy to plan, but always within the boundaries set by the Secretariat. It is autonomy with a manual.”

This reflects what Barroso (1996a) defined as decreed autonomy - autonomy that is formally granted but substantively limited. Despite legislative recognition, schools continue to depend on higher administrative levels for critical decisions, such as resource allocation, staffing, and evaluation.

Teachers also noted that bureaucratic reporting requirements often absorb time and energy that could otherwise be directed toward pedagogical innovation. A teacher summarized this tension succinctly: “Autonomy here sometimes means more documents to justify what we do.”

This contradiction highlights a structural paradox: decentralization at the regional level has not always translated into local empowerment. The persistence of centralized procedures reproduces what Lima (2020) calls a bureaucratic ethos, which privileges compliance over trust.

At the same time, several participants described subtle ways of navigating these constraints. They reported adhering to formal requirements while informally adjusting practices to better fit the school’s pedagogical objectives. This behaviour exemplifies what can be understood as strategic compliance (Barroso, 2004; Brunsson, 1989): a pragmatic approach through which teachers and leaders comply with official norms on paper but reinterpret them in practice to safeguard flexibility and contextual relevance. Rather than passive obedience, this form of compliance represents an active effort to reconcile regulation with initiative, allowing schools to operate with a degree of autonomy within tightly prescribed frameworks.

5.2 Constructed Autonomy: Leadership and Collective Practice

Despite the persistence of formal constraints, the school demonstrates multiple examples of constructed autonomy, autonomy developed through internal collaboration, shared leadership, and professional initiative.

One of the strongest illustrations of this was found in the interdisciplinary projects implemented under the regional adaptation of the Project for Curricular Autonomy and Flexibility. Teachers from different departments worked together to design learning experiences around themes relevant to the local community, such as environmental sustainability, migration, and regional identity.

A participant emphasized the collective nature of these processes: “Autonomy is not given to us; we build it together, when we decide how to work as a team.”

Leadership played a central role in fostering these practices. The Director’s approach was described as “inclusive” and “supportive,” focusing on enabling dialogue rather than imposing directives. Meetings were structured to encourage debate and reflection, creating what Bolívar (2000) defines as shared leadership.

These findings are consistent with evidence reported by Costa and Bento (2015), who, in a study conducted in a Madeiran school, identified leadership behaviours that “enable others to act” and “encourage the heart” as key to mobilizing staff for collaborative work. Their research reinforces the idea that autonomy emerges not from formal authority but from the capacity of leaders to cultivate trust, recognition, and collective agency within the school.

Overall, the case confirms the argument that autonomy is not merely a legal status but a cultural and relational construction (Lima, 2020; Fraga *et al.*, 2022). It depends on organizational climate, communication, and mutual trust among actors. The Director’s leadership style was particularly effective in mediating between regulation and initiative, interpreting regional norms in ways that opened space for experimentation rather than closure.

5.3 Leadership as a Mediator between Policy and Practice

Leadership in the studied school functioned as a bridge between formal policy and lived practice, performing what Lima *et al.* (2024) describe as adaptive mediation.

This mediation required balancing two demands: compliance with official guidelines and responsiveness to local needs. The leadership team consistently translated regulatory frameworks into feasible actions, allowing teachers to adapt curricular objectives to students’ realities.

A teacher explained: “We comply with the rules, but we also reinterpret them so they make sense for our students.”

This reflects what Leithwood *et al.* (2006) identify as transformational leadership, leadership that fosters professional growth and shared purpose while maintaining accountability. The leadership's success depended less on authority and more on relational competence: empathy, communication, and negotiation.

Moreover, distributed leadership emerged as a crucial mechanism for sustaining autonomy. Department Coordinators acted as intermediaries between management and teachers, ensuring that decisions were collectively discussed. This model reduced resistance and strengthened ownership of school projects, reinforcing the democratic ethos at the heart of Madeira's educational tradition.

At the same time, leadership also operated within an environment marked by contradictions between the rhetoric of autonomy and the persistence of control-oriented practices. This tension illustrates what Brunsson (1989) terms organizational hypocrisy - the coexistence of symbolic commitments to autonomy with administrative behaviours that reproduce centralization. Far from indicating incoherence or failure, this form of organizational hypocrisy functions as a necessary adaptation that allows schools to remain legitimate in the eyes of regulatory authorities while preserving operational flexibility and professional initiative (Lima, preface in Brunsson, 2006).

5.4 Organizational Hypocrisy and Functional Adaptation

The coexistence of autonomy rhetoric and bureaucratic practice was interpreted through Brunsson's (1989) concept of organizational hypocrisy, the necessary separation between talk, decisions, and actions that allows organizations to survive under conflicting pressures.

In the school studied, this dynamic was evident in how institutional documents adopted the discourse of autonomy and participation, while daily operations often followed established routines dictated by regional regulations.

However, this hypocrisy was not purely negative. It served as a functional adaptation, enabling the school to satisfy external accountability requirements while preserving internal flexibility. As one leader put it: "We follow the official plan, but within it we find ways to innovate."

This adaptive behaviour aligns with Brunsson's argument that hypocrisy can sustain organizational legitimacy. In this case, it provided the school with a

buffer zone for creative reinterpretation, allowing teachers to pursue pedagogical projects within the constraints of official norms.

Thus, rather than viewing the gap between discourse and practice as failure, the study interprets it as a strategic resource, a space of negotiation through which leaders transform policy into meaningful practice.

5.5 The Broader Implications for Democratic Management

The findings highlight several implications for the broader debate on democratic school management in Portugal.

First, autonomy cannot be reduced to administrative decentralization. It requires cultural and relational conditions that encourage participation, dialogue, and co-responsibility. Madeira's collective governance model demonstrates that collegial structures can sustain these conditions even within hierarchical systems.

Second, leadership is the decisive mediating factor. Effective leaders act as interpreters of autonomy, translating regulations into opportunities for professional agency. Their legitimacy derives not from formal authority but from their capacity to build trust and collective meaning.

Third, the analysis suggests that contradictions between regulation and practice are inherent to democratic systems. Rather than attempting to eliminate them, educational policies should recognise and manage them productively. As Anísio Teixeira (1962) argued, democracy must be "learned and practiced"; it cannot be decreed.

In this sense, autonomy in Madeira's schools represents both a challenge and a promise. It embodies the ongoing effort to reconcile structure and freedom, compliance and creativity, a tension that, far from being a flaw, constitutes the very essence of democratic Education.

6 Final Considerations

Fifty years after the democratic revolution of April 25, 1974, the Portuguese Education system continues to wrestle with a structural paradox: the coexistence of autonomy as a declared principle and centralization as an administrative practice. The case study presented here, conducted in the Autonomous Region of Madeira, demonstrates that the realization of autonomy depends less on

legislative frameworks and more on the relational and cultural dynamics shaped by leadership.

Three main conclusions can be drawn from this research.

First, school autonomy in Madeira is both decreed and constructed. While regional laws formally recognise the autonomy of schools, their practical enactment occurs through the initiative, collaboration, and reflection of educational actors. The distinction between what is prescribed and what is lived remains central to understanding the political nature of school management.

Second, leadership functions as the mediating element between regulation and freedom. The leaders observed in this study demonstrated that autonomy can be fostered not through authority but through participation, trust, and shared vision. Their work illustrates what Lima (2020) calls democratic leadership: the capacity to coordinate without dominating, to guide while empowering.

Third, the contradictions between autonomy discourse and bureaucratic practice are not anomalies but inherent features of complex organizations. Drawing on Brunsson's (1989) notion of organizational hypocrisy, the study shows that schools must often balance legitimacy and innovation. By navigating these tensions ethically and strategically, leadership can transform hypocrisy into adaptability, ensuring both compliance and creativity.

In this process, a crucial element is what may be termed democratic responsibility, the shared ethical commitment of teachers and leaders to act collectively in the pursuit of educational improvement (Teixeira, 1962; Costa, Bento, 2015). Rather than viewing autonomy as an individual or institutional privilege, this perspective frames it as a moral and civic duty exercised through participation, dialogue, and mutual accountability.

The broader implication is that autonomy and democracy in Education are ongoing projects, never completed, always contested. The Madeiran experience reveals that sustaining democratic management requires constant negotiation between structure and agency, prescription and practice. As Anísio Teixeira (1962) reminded us, "Education is not preparation for democracy; it is democracy itself."

Ultimately, autonomy should be understood not as an administrative privilege but as a collective right and responsibility, built daily through the interactions, decisions, and ethical commitments of those who lead and teach.

Perspetivas de liderança na implementação da autonomia escolar: um estudo de caso na Região Autónoma da Madeira

Resumo

O estudo analisa as perspetivas de liderança no exercício da autonomia escolar na Região Autónoma da Madeira, em Portugal. A investigação discute a contradição entre o que é legalmente prescrito e o que é efetivamente praticado, considerando o papel das lideranças como mediadoras entre normas e práticas. A partir de um estudo de caso qualitativo, recorreu-se à análise documental e a entrevistas com membros da direção e docentes. Os resultados revelam uma coexistência entre uma autonomia decretada, fortemente condicionada por estruturas hierárquicas, e uma autonomia construída, que emerge de práticas colaborativas e da liderança distribuída. A análise, apoiada na teoria da hipocrisia organizacional de Nils Brunsson e na tradição democrática de Anísio Teixeira, evidencia que a autonomia escolar é um processo relacional e político, dependente da capacidade das escolas e das suas lideranças em construir espaços reais de decisão democrática.

Palavras-chave: Autonomia Escolar. Liderança. Descentralização. Gestão Democrática. Madeira. Hipocrisia Organizacional.

Perspectivas de liderazgo en la práctica de la autonomía escolar: un estudio de caso en la Región Autónoma de Madeira

Resumen

Este estudio analizó las perspectivas de liderazgo en el ejercicio de la autonomía escolar en la Región Autónoma de Madeira, Portugal. Se examinó la contradicción entre lo que está legalmente prescrito y lo que se practica efectivamente, destacando el papel del liderazgo como mediador entre la regulación y la práctica. Basado en un estudio de caso cualitativo, los datos se obtuvieron mediante análisis documental y entrevistas con miembros de la dirección y docentes. Los resultados mostraron la coexistencia de una autonomía decretada, condicionada por estructuras jerárquicas, y una autonomía construida, que surge de prácticas colaborativas y de un liderazgo distribuido. A partir de la teoría de la hipocresía organizacional de Nils Brunsson y la tradición democrática de Anísio Teixeira, se argumentó que la autonomía es un proceso relacional y político, dependiente de la capacidad de las escuelas y sus líderes para crear espacios reales de participación democrática.

Palabras clave: Autonomía Escolar. Liderazgo. Descentralización. Gestión Democrática. Madeira. Hipocresía Organizacional.

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