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Schools in rural areas and school concentration measures: the case of the geographical area of Pinhal Interior Sul, Portugal (early 21st century)*

Las escuelas en las zonas rurales y las medidas de concentración escolar: el caso de la zona geográfica de Pinhal Interior Sul, Portugal (principios del siglo XXI)

Escola em meio rural e medidas de concentração escolar: o caso da zona geográfica do Pinhal Interior Sul, Portugal (início do século XXI)

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Abstract: This paper seeks to analyze the impact of the closure of non-graded schools and the associated concentration measures (construction of graded schools) on a geographical area of mainland Portugal - *Pinhal Interior Sul* (PIS), a low-density rural territory -, in the early 21st century. Mobilizing a set of statistical sources (demographic and educational) and also using municipal education policy papers, it aims to ascertain whether this process conformed with the social, economic, and pedagogical reasons based on the idea of rural development from an integrated perspective. More specifically, what development vision was conveyed? What can be concluded is that neither was the regression of the rural world inverted (in fact, it was intensified) nor did the *graded school* typology seems to have increased the pedagogical capacity of schools.
Keywords: Portugal. *Pinhal Interior Sul*. Graded school. Rural school. Municipal education policy paper.

Resumen: El artículo pretende analizar el impacto que el cierre de las escuelas unitarias y las medidas de concentración asociadas (construcción de centros escolares) tuvieron en una zona geográfica del Portugal continental -el Pinhal Interior Sul (PIS), un territorio de baja densidad y rural-, a principios del siglo XXI. El objetivo, movilizando un conjunto de fuentes estadísticas (demográficas y educativas) y, también, recurriendo a los mapas educativos de los municipios, era comprender si este proceso obedecía a razones sociales, económicas y pedagógicas basadas en la idea del desarrollo rural en una perspectiva integrada.

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Básicamente, ¿qué visión del desarrollo se difundió? Lo que concluimos es que no sólo no se invirtió el retroceso del mundo rural (de hecho, se intensificó), sino que la tipología de centro escolar no parece haber aumentado la capacidad pedagógica de las escuelas.
Palabras clave: Portugal. Pinhal Interior Sul. Escolas graduadas. Escola rural. Carta educativa.

Resumo: O artigo procura analisar o impacto que o encerramento de escolas unitárias e as medidas de concentração associadas (construção de centros escolares) tiveram numa zona geográfica de Portugal Continental – o Pinhal Interior Sul (PIS), território de baixa densidade e rural –, no início do século XXI. O objetivo, mobilizando um conjunto de fontes estatísticas (demográficas e educacionais) e, também, recorrendo às cartas educativas dos municípios, foi o de perceber se esse processo obedeceu a razões sociais, económicas e pedagógicas fundadas na ideia de desenvolvimento rural numa perspetiva integrada. No fundo, que visão de desenvolvimento foi difundida? Aquilo que se conclui é que não só não se inverteu o recuo do mundo rural (intensificou-se, aliás) como a tipologia *centro escolar* parece não ter aumentado a capacidade pedagógica das escolas.
Palavras-chave: Portugal. Pinhal Interior Sul. Centro escolar. Escola rural. Carta educativa.

Introduction

It was at the turn of the 21st century in Portugal that the structure of the 1st cycle of basic education network [1] was identified as a predictor of school failure.[2] This, in fact, has been the central argument of the educational policies adopted since 2002 (Rodrigues et al., 2017), namely as regards the extinction of schools in rural areas. To some extent, this extinction was inevitable. Indeed, one needs only to bear in mind that 882 thousand pupils were enrolled in the 1st cycle of basic education (absolute maximum) in 1981, however this figure plummeted in later years.

In 2006, for example, the number of pupils enrolled in this cycle was already down to half of that recorded in the early 1980s; to be historically accurate, this figure stood at 443 thousand (Rodrigues et al., 2017). It is also true that this reduction was not linear. In fact, and although the educational policy measures tended to be universal[3], their impact varied from region to region (Rodrigues et al., 2017). In light of the above, this paper seeks to ascertain whether the extinction of schools and the school concentration measures (creation of school centres), especially in rural populations and areas with low population density (the main targets of the afore-mentioned

[1] The Portuguese education system is divided into different levels of education. It begins with pre-school, with optional attendance from three to six years, followed by the 1st Cycle of Basic Education, which is the focus of this paper. This cycle has a duration of four years and an expected attendance age of six to ten years.

[2] For example, the *Documento Orientador das Políticas para o Ensino Básico* [Guiding Document for Basic Education Policies], published by the Ministry of Education in 1998, pinpoints the dispersion of the school network and the poverty of many schools in conditions of social isolation as predictive factors of pupils' underachievement.

[3] The following measures should be noted: Decree-Law no. 35/88, of 4 February, which provides for the extinction of schools that no longer have more than ten pupils; Legislative Order no. 27/97, of 12 May, which establishes the concept of school clusters; *Programa Especial de Reordenamento da Rede de Escolas do 1º Ciclo do Ensino Básico* [Special Programme for the Rehabilitation of the 1st Cycle of Basic Education School Network], created in 2002 and applied to different parts of the country; *Programa Nacional de Requalificação da Rede do 1.º Ciclo do Ensino Básico e da Educação Pré-Escolar* [National Programme for the Upgrading of the 1st Cycle of Basic Education and Pre-School Education Network] (2007), creating a new type of school, referred to as the School Centre, bringing together the abovementioned levels of education. The Special Programme for the Rehabilitation of the Basic Education 1st Cycle Schools Network created in 2002 and applied to different territories in the country; National Programme for the Upgrading of the 1st Cycle of Basic Education and Pre-School Education Network (2007), creating a new type of school referred to as *School Centre*, conciliating the aforementioned levels of education; Resolution of the Council of Ministers no. 44/2010, of 14 June, determining, namely, the extinction of the 1st Cycle of Basic Education public establishments with fewer than 21 pupils.

educational policies), conformed with the social, economic and pedagogical grounds based on the idea of rural development from an integrated perspective.[4]

This question is addressed by analysing the speeches and arguments contained in the municipalities' educational papers, which are fundamental instruments for the planning of the education and training network provision.[5] The geographical context corresponds to the area of Pinhal Interior Sul (PIS), in mainland Portugal, comprising the municipalities of Oleiros, Proença-a-Nova, Sertã, Mação and Vila de Rei, in a chronological examination extending from the early twenty-first century - when, in fact, the effects of the school concentration measures became visible - to the mid-2010s, a period during which the number of schools with fewer than 21 pupils was already practically residual. The official education statistics and the municipalities' educational papers were adopted as the main sources. The paper is organised into three sections. The first proposes a reflection on schools in rural areas. One of the issues that arises is our understanding of what schools in rural areas are. The definition proposed by Rui Canário (2008) is taken as a starting point, in which a school is referred to as having the following characteristics: proximity, small scale and heterogeneity of the single-class.[6] Moreover, these characteristics may contain a sense of prospection and change, for example, a reconstruction of the identity of rural communities (Amiguinho, 2008) and even pedagogical innovation (Santa María-Cardába & Sampedro, 2020). It is therefore necessary to contrast the rural school and its persistence over centuries with the normativeness of the *gramática escolar* [grammar of schooling] concept, forged from the historically recent worldwide diffusion of the graded school model (markedly urban), in which the school population is grouped into supposedly homogeneous grades by level and age, each with its own teacher (Rockwell & Molina, 2014). In the second section, quantitative data on the evolution of the school network in mainland Portugal (1st cycle of basic education schools with fewer than 21 pupils) are analysed, in order to contextualise them according to the educational policy pursued by the Ministry of Education. Finally, the PIS area is characterised and some of the educational outcome indicators and the options followed regarding school concentration in that area are discussed. It will become clear that demography was an important factor (or rather, an argument), but also the centrally defined policy guidelines, which, by sublimating pedagogical and teaching quality grounds, justified the closure of many schools with under 21 pupils; thus, what was formerly a "proximity network" became a "select network", concentrated in the seats of the municipalities (Lima & Torres, 2020). This assumption did not prevent the formation of different interpretations (of greater or lesser resistance to the centralised regulation) from municipality to municipality in the elected geographical area - where the political dimension of local action was at stake (Simão, 2019). Yet it is also true that in the historical period considered, as in no other, the school network changed rapidly according to the demographic, economic, political and social surroundings.

School in rural areas: concepts, characteristics, resilience and pedagogical value

It is important to discuss the concept of "school in rural areas", but it is also important to explain why this expression is more preferrable than "rural school". According to José Maria

[4] The idea in question is that rural development should be based on the interdependence of various sectors (agriculture, industry, transport, trade, education, culture, etc.). On this subject see Rodriguez (1981).

[5] The concept of educational paper was created by Decree-Law no. 7/2003, of 15 January. Its objectives comprise, among others: ensuring the adequacy of the pre-school, primary and secondary education establishments network; including a prospective analysis, setting objectives for progressive planning; promoting the development of the school cluster process. The municipal council is responsible for the preparation of the educational paper, which is approved by the municipal assembly following its discussion and appraisal by the municipal education council.

[6] Another term for the "single-class" school is "unitarian school".

Azevedo (1995), the school does not belong to a specific environment (a fortiori, rural), since the curricula, manuals and, frequently, the teachers are external; he therefore considers it preferrable, bringing to bear the thought of Miguel Ortega, to speak of "school in the rural" (p. 103). And this was stated *a fortiori*, since, according to Aida Terrón and José María Rozada (2005), school culture, the origin of which is urban, and contextual culture, in which the pupils are immersed before entering and upon leaving the school space (in a rural environment), are different. Thus, to speak of a school in a rural environment means to refer to two cultures (one hegemonic) that evolve in opposite directions. More explicitly, the triumph of one entails the end of the other:

> The school was constituted as an institutional and organisational instrument especially designed for the systematic modelling of children's behaviour. It had an urban origin to meet the demand for elementary knowledge, but it later spread to all areas, penetrating the rural environment particularly from the mid- 19th century onwards. Here, the school contrasted with the great power of traditional rural culture, in which the child was totally immersed before entering and upon leaving school. Gradually, however, the school became established and gained strength in the face of rural culture (…). Thus, gradually, the school collaborated as another factor in the transformation of the rural world, whose traditional principles have been falling apart at a rapid rate in recent times. (Rozada Martínez & Terrón Bañuelos, 2005).

In Portugal, the regression of the rural world began to take shape from the second half of the 1960s (Azevedo, 1995). In fact, it was from this historical point onwards that the area sown each year began to decrease - a symptom of the rural society's transformation, which was becoming increasingly less reliant on agricultural activity (Azevedo, 1995). This change was accompanied by other phenomena, namely: emigration; population concentration in urban areas; decrease of the active agricultural population (Azevedo, 1995). This also brought profound changes to the 1st Cycle of Basic Education school network, given the suppression of a large number of schools in rural areas, and markedly in the period between the early 21st century and the mid-2010s. In fact, this one-way movement - it should be noted that the government did not create alternatives - prevented rural areas from having equal opportunities in terms of school access and success. Indeed, what was witnessed was a devaluation of the modes of socialization of children living in rural areas, based on the assumption (often also assumed by the local authority) that rurality is the antipode of modernity - historically, an idea well characterised by José António Afonso (2016) in his analysis of rural schools in the First Portuguese Republic. One wonders whether it would have been possible to create new dynamics in rural communities - the identity reconstruction so often mentioned by Abílio Amiguinho (2008) - based on the symbolic value of the school and considering, as stated by José Azevedo (1995), that the school in rural areas "is an instrument of affirmation, a sign of belonging, a rare benefit that cannot be relinquished without resistance" (p. 104). In addition to this premise – that the school institution can contribute "to the social revitalization of rural areas" (Canário, 2008, p. 35) –, from a pedagogical perspective, it is particularly interesting to analyse the configuration (and resilience) of the school in rural areas (unitarian or single-class schools) against the normativeness of the *gramática escolar* concept, forged from the historically recent worldwide diffusion of the graded school model, in which the school population is grouped into supposedly homogeneous grades by level and age, each with its own teacher (Rockwell & Molina, 2014). A further objective of this paper is to deepen this idea, referring not only to the concept of school in rural areas proposed by Rui Canário (2008), who emphasizes the proximity, small scale and heterogeneity of the single-class, but also to the perspective of other authors. For example, Van Zanten (as cited in Jean, 2007) refers to a single-class school in a small village or town (a 'peripheral school', by definition) as having "une configuration scolaire spécifique du fait des caractéristiques de son publique, de certains traits de son fonctionnement interne et des relations qu'elle entretient avec le centre" (p. 8). On the other hand, in the mid-1990s, R. Boix proposed the following definition: "The school in a rural environment is an educational institution grounded on the rural environment and culture, with a heterogeneous and singular organisational

structure (depending on the type of school) and a multidimensional pedagogical and didactic configuration" (as cited in Sauras Jaime, 2000, p. 31).

Indeed, the characteristics mentioned by these authors, namely the heterogeneity of the class (less pedagogical uniformity), connection to the environment, but also curriculum autonomy and respect for pupils' different learning paces (Olivares, 2007) – or rather, the multidimensionality referred to by Boix - allow us to think of the school in rural areas as not being obsolete. In fact, it actually affirms itself as a reference to call into question the graded school model (Rockwell & Molina, 2014) - or the assumption that the pupils, once grouped by level of knowledge and age, would in principle have the same learning development (Silva, 2017).

Despite the profound changes observed in several rural contexts over the last decades - hence some authors prefer to refer to "different rural environments" or "multiple ruralities" (in fact, the reality of the school in a rural environment is as diverse as the territories in which it is located) – both the unitarian school and the related educational solutions have persisted over time. Even though the future of the rural world is at stake, the unitarian school cannot but be considered an alternative to a school which is more concerned with economic and social demands than with cultural and pedagogical values. Therefore, it should assert itself as an alternative model to a hegemonic and homogenizing culture, one that is capable of producing/ reproducing the social and cultural values of a rural environment in transformation – and here it is important to create social networks and cultural hybridization (Rockwell & Molina, 2014). In particular, the educational value of the unitarian school lies in diversity, which necessarily involves classroom management strategies that respect and are attentive to the difference in learning rhythms. The following sections demonstrate that this value and the idea that the rural school can contribute to the revitalization of the surrounding communities have not featured in the approach adopted by the government or, for that matter, in the spirit of many local actors.

Evolution of the 1st Cycle of Basic Education School Network in Mainland Portugal (schools with fewer than 21 pupils)

Before focusing on the school concentration measures adopted in PIS - associated with demographic changes, rural regression, urbanization and coastalization, leading (by normative imposition) to the closure of schools with fewer than 21 pupils and a redefinition of the school network -, it is important to outline the situation observed in mainland Portugal. The chronology extends from the early 2000s - when, in fact, these effects became visible (namely, the closure of schools and the redefinition of the school network) - to the mid 2010s (when the number of schools with fewer than 21 pupils was already practically residual). Table 1 illustrates the reduction in the number of 1st cycle of basic education schools with under 21 pupils, specifying the period considered - academic years from 2004/05 to 2014/15.

Table 1 - 1st cycle of basic education schools with fewer than 21 pupils, public network, Portugal (mainland)

2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
3064	2915	1383	905	591	602	648	308	323	241	162

Source: Perdigão (2017).

In the space of a decade, a clear decrease in the number of schools is easily observed. In fact, the initial situation of 3064 schools plummets to a total of only 162 schools ten years later - representing, in practice, the end of the single-class or unitarian school. However, there are periods in which this reduction (which is not linear) is more expressive, and should be seen in light of the

implementation of specific educational policy measures. Firstly, a variation may be noted between the 2005/06 academic year and the following academic year, corresponding to the closure of 47.4% of schools with the afore-mentioned characteristics. This is a consequence of the Special Programme for the Rehabilitation of the 1st Cycle of Basic Education School Network, created in 2002. Bearing Table 1 in mind, up to the academic year 2008/09, a sharp fall in the number of schools may be observed, with the greatest variation (absolute, in fact) in the transition from the 2007/08 academic year to the following school year. This was when a new type of school was created, referred to as *school centre*, in the framework of the National Programme for the Upgrading of the 1st Cycle of Basic Education and Pre-School Education Network (2007). As a result, 65.3% of 1st Cycle of Basic Education schools with fewer than 21 pupils were closed. Another highly significant decrease may also be observed in the transition from the 2010/11 academic year to the 2011/12 academic year. In fact, in this transition, 47.5% of the teaching establishments considered became extinct, a consequence of the Resolution of the Council of Ministers no. 44/2010, of 14 June, which determined the extinction of the 1st cycle of basic education public establishments with fewer than 21 pupils.

The drastic reduction in the number of schools in the period in question and the related school concentration were not only due to the implementation of central educational policy measures. In fact, they were also the result of locally developed action logics. This is precisely the subject that will be addressed in the following pages, with reference to the geographical area of PIS, following its characterisation and analysis of some of the educational outcome indicators.

School concentration measures in the geographical area of PIS

Characterisation of the geographical area

The geographical area of PIS is partially integrated in the sub-regions of *Beira Baixa* and *Médio Tejo*, both, in turn, being part of the Central Region of Portugal.[7] However, between 1986 and 2015 it corresponded territorially to NUTS[8] III of inland central Portugal and consisted of the municipalities of Mação, Vila de Rei, Proença-a-Nova, Sertã and Oleiros. In 2013, by way of a legal alteration, the PIS nomenclature became extinct.[9] Nevertheless, as referred to by Helena Cabeleira, Carolina Carvalho and Ana Madeira (2020), this designation "is still alive today in the language of the local population when they wish to refer to the territory of the community to which they belong" (p. 142) – a question of identity. Thus, the present analysis, whose chronological period is situated between the academic years of 2004/05 and 2014/05, maintains the PIS territorial unit, namely the five afore-mentioned municipalities, as its methodological reference. This option made it necessary to break down some of the statistical information on education, since the sources from the 2013/14 academic year adopt the new nomenclature and integrate the aforementioned municipalities in the sub-regions of *Beira Baixa* and *Médio Tejo*.[10]

7 The Central Region of Portugal is considered to be one of the areas of the country most affected by population desertification, demographic ageing and high mortality rates (along with low birth rates). It is also characterised as a region connected to agricultural (self)subsistence and (e)migratory flows. On this subject see Penteado (2012).

8 This is an abbreviation of the nomenclature of the Territorial Units for Statistics.

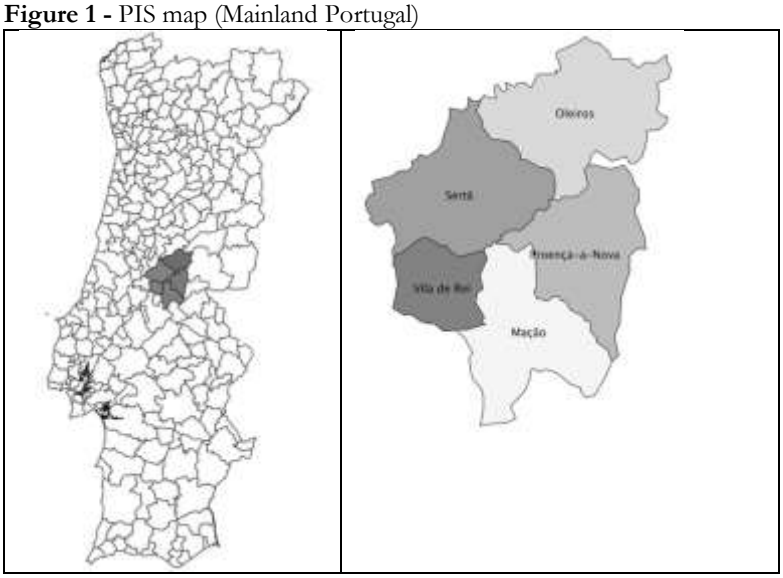
9 The municipalities of Sertã, Vila de Rei and Mação were integrated in the sub-region *Médio Tejo*; in turn, the municipalities of Oleiros and Proença-a-Nova became part of the sub-region *Beira Baixa*. On this subject see Soares et al. (2018).

10 Referring, in particular, to the information published by the Directorate-General for Education and Science Statistics (DGEEC).

It is worth noting that the *geodesic centre* of mainland Portugal is precisely in the municipality of Vila de Rei (Figure 1).

As already mentioned, the five constituent municipalities of PIS have a common identity based on the "genuineness of the rural" and the "importance of nature as a vehicle for development and territorial enhancement" (*Roteiros mais Centro. Pinhal Interior Sul. Roteiro mais Centro*, n. d.). It is an inland, essentially rural territory, subject to coastal economic growth and to population exodus; this, since the 1950s, has led to population ageing (calling demographic sustainability into question) and the desertification of the geographical area (Mateus, 2008). On the other hand, as the population density is low, settlements are concentrated in small areas and parishes (Penteado, 2012).

Figure 1 - PIS map (Mainland Portugal)



Source: Penteado (2012).

It is also significant that Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in the five municipalities is below the national average (Martins, 2007).[11] Furthermore, in 2011, the PIS recorded the lowest "activity rates" in the country (Portugal, 2012). For all the above reasons - plus the low "economic, social and business attractiveness" of the area (Mateus, 2008, p. 16), driving young people to migrate to urban centres in search of jobs and to pursue their studies, it is certainly not surprising that the resident population has low levels of schooling and qualification. This statement is further backed by the 2011 Census: of the 40705 inhabitants of PIS registered at the time, 5368 had no level of schooling and 16707 had only the 1st cycle of basic education (Portugal, 2012).

This data emphasizes the coastal-inland dichotomy of the country; at the same time it reflects the decade-long inability of the political power to keep the resident population in the geographical area. The focus on the economic dimension in urban areas, leading to rural exodus, necessarily has repercussions for educational outcome indicators.

Analysis of educational outcome indicators

In this section some PIS educational outcome indicators are analysed; first, considering the universe of the geographical area and, subsequently, breaking down the data according to each of

[11] It should be added that the primary sector is predominant in most of the parishes, although it is very much based on a subsistence economy. In this regard, see Penteado (2012).

the five municipalities. It should be noted that, methodologically, the PIS geographical unit has been maintained, even though the sources referring to the 2013/14 academic year are in line with the new nomenclature and integrate the five municipalities in the sub-regions of *Beira Baixa* and *Médio Tejo*. The rationale behind the outcome indicators considered (enrolled pupils, retention and drop-out rates and number of educational establishments) also requires further explanation. On the one hand, since during the time period under study (2004/05 to 2014/15) many educational establishments had been suppressed, largely due to the decreased young population, it appeared logical to select the "enrolled pupils" and "educational establishments" indicators. On the other hand, the selection of the outcome indicator "retention and dropout rates" was not so obvious. The idea, in this case, was to try to assess whether the progressive decrease in the number of 1st cycle of basic education schools over the decade, which in practice involved concentrating pupils in fewer but larger schools, supposedly, with better educational conditions (school centres), was in any way related to the retention and drop-out rates. From the outset it was acknowledged that this is a very complex issue, involving several variables. In this respect, José Maria Azevedo (2014) clearly explains:

> It is not easy to isolate the effects of network and facility changes on the improvement of educational outcomes, let alone to establish cause and effect relationships. The most immediate changes in day-to-day school life - access to school meals, reduction in the number of schools operating on a dual system or use of specific facilities - are more perceptible than the impact on teaching, learning and outcomes. (p. 576).

Let us now begin by analysing the evolution of the number of pupils enrolled in the 1st cycle of basic education (Table 2).

Table 2 - Number of enrolled pupils, retention and dropout rates and number of public educational establishments, PIS

Academic year	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Pupils enrolled[12]	1646	1470	1397	1362	1334	1266	1221	1156	1100	1048	986
Retention and dropout rates[13]	4,8 **(5,2)**	2,7 **(4,3)**	2,6 **(3,9)**	2,1 **(3,6)**	3,9 **(3,4)**	3,6 **(3,5)**	2,7 **(3,2)**	2,8 **(4,2)**	4,6 **(4,6)**	4,9 **(4,8)**	2,5 **(4,0)**
Educational establishments[14]	93	89	60	50	45	41	37	36	30	29	28

Source: Portugal (2014, 2016, 2017a).
Note: The national mean is in brackets and in bold (mainland Portugal).

The progressive reduction of this figure over the course of a decade is evident, and highly significant when considered as a whole. In other words, between 2004/05 and 2014/15 the number of pupils enrolled decreased by 40.1%. Of course, this data must be considered in light of other, namely demographic indicators. For example, the data shows that between 2001 and 2011, when the last two censuses with published data were conducted[15], the resident population fell from 44803 to 40705 inhabitants (Portugal, 2012), corresponding to a reduction of 9.1%.[16] On the other hand, a trend towards an ageing population was observed in this universe. In fact, in the specified

[12] Pupils enrolled in the 1st cycle of basic education (regular education).

[13] Percentage ratio between the number of pupils who did not pass to the next school year and the number of pupils enrolled in that same school year. It refers to the 1st Cycle of Basic Education (regular education).

[14] Public establishments, although the source does not specify their type.

[15] Only the preliminary data are available for the 2021 census.

[16] This percentage doubles when considering the data already available for 2019, that is, between 2001 and 2019, the resident population in PIS decreased by 18,3%. In this regard see PORDATA, available at: https://www.pordata.pt

timeframe, the ageing rate[17] was twice as high as the national figure (Branquinho, 2011)[18]. As for age structure, it should also be noted that this decline was most prevalent among the young population.[19] Furthermore, to better contextualise the reduction in the number of pupils enrolled, between 2001 and 2011, the fertility rate [20] in PIS was well below the national rate and even that of the Central Region (Branquinho, 2011).

Over the decade from 2004/05 to 2014/15, in line with the decline in the number of pupils enrolled, a significant decrease was observed in the number of public educational establishments. Unfortunately, the source does not break down the school buildings into types. However, between 2004/05 and 2014/15, the percentage of school closures (30.1%) was largely due to school concentration measures and entailed the extinction of several 1st cycle of basic education schools with fewer than 21 pupils.

The retention and dropout rate indicator also calls for analysis. To what extent, for example, is it possible to establish a relationship between this indicator and the number of schools, considering that the extinction of unitarian schools and school concentration measures would supposedly bring better teaching and learning conditions? As mentioned in the reference to the research of José Maria Azevedo (2014), this is a complex issue, involving several variables and requiring contextual data that is not available. It would be important, for example, to have an understanding of the social, economic, cultural, behavioural and motivational conditions of the pupils and their families and also to have information about the schools as an organisation. Returning to Table 2, it may be said that there is no cause and effect relationship between the progressive reduction in the number of schools over the decade and the observed variation in retention and drop-out rates. In fact, the fluctuation of these rates is quite clear, although the differentials are mostly negative, with the exception of the school years 2008/09, 2011/12, 2012/13 and 2013/14. These are, for the most part, the years when the rates equalled or exceeded the national average. Considering the retention and dropout rate, the National Education Council had already underlined a reversal of the decreasing trend recorded since 2001/02, for the whole country and from 2011 (Conselho Nacional de Educação. *Estado da Educação 2013*, 2014). This situation was reversed as of the year 2014/15 (Conselho Nacional de Educação, *Estado da Educação 2015*, 2016). It should also be noted that from 2010/11 the retention and dropout rates were aligned (PIS and mainland Portugal).

The three outcome indicators in Table 2 will now be analysed, but by breaking down the data per municipality.

[17] Number of elderly individuals (65 years and over) per 100 children and young people (under 15 years).

[18]A more recent study shows that, between 2011 and 2016, the rate of ageing worsened in all regions of the country and was seen to be higher in rural against urban territories; more pronounced asymmetry in the sub-regions of *Beira Baixa* and *Trás-os-Montes* (PORTUGAL, 2017b). The figures for the PIS geographical area are rather astounding. For example, bearing in mind the data already available for 2019, in the municipality of Oleiros there were 705 elderly people per 100 children and young people! In this regard see the aforementioned PORDATA website.

[19] In the time elapsed between the last two censuses, the following percentage loss of the total population in PIS was recorded and broken down into the following categories: - 22.22% (0 to 14 years); - 30.84% (15 to 24 years); - 5.14% (25 to 64 years); - 1.63% (65 years or above) (Portugal, 2012).

[20] Relating the number of live births to the number of women of childbearing age.

Table 3 - Number of enrolled pupils, retention and dropout rates and number of public educational establishments, PIS, by municipality

Academic year/ Municipality	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
OLEIROS											
Pupils enrolled[21]	146	126	134	116	116	123	103	101	94	88	88
Retention and dropout rates[22]	6,8	1,6	3,0	4,3	4,3	0	1,0	1,0	6,4	2,3	4,5
Educational establishments[23]	13	11	7	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	4
PROENÇA-A-NOVA											
Pupils enrolled	308	306	268	277	253	222	224	205	205	201	174
Retention and dropout rates	2,6	2,9	2,6	2,2	2,4	1,8	2,2	2,4	3,9	2,5	2,9
Educational establishments	17	15	12	10	8	8	5	5	5	4	4
SERTÃ											
Pupils enrolled	683	673	633	612	607	588	583	567	535	503	489
Retention and dropout rates	4,2	2,2	1,9	1,3	3,1	3,7	2,9	2,6	3,4	6,8	3,1
Educational establishments	37	37	24	22	19	16	15	15	15	15	14
VILA DE REI											
Pupils enrolled	114	118	136	133	121	127	113	109	101	98	87
Retention and dropout rates	10,5	1,7	0	1,5	6,6	3,1	0	1,8	7,9	8,2	1,1
Educational establishments	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
MAÇÃO											
Pupils enrolled	243	247	226	224	237	205	196	173	165	158	148
Retention and dropout rates	5,3	4,5	6,2	3,1	5,9	7,8	5,1	5,2	6,7	2,5	0,7
Educational establishments	24	24	15	11	11	10	10	10	4	4	4

Source: Portugal (2014, 2015, 2017c).

During the decade under analysis, the number of enrolled pupils fell in all the PIS municipalities. However, the fall observed is not identical. For example, in Vila de Rei, the least populated municipality with the smallest surface area, the number of pupils decreased by 23.7%. This figure is well below the average of the five municipalities and, in fact, the lowest in the geographical area. On the other hand, in the most populous municipality (Sertã), a decrease of 28.4% was recorded, also well below the PIS average. In turn, the highest percentage was recorded in Proença-a-Nova (43.5%), the second most populous municipality. Although not exclusively, this data should be seen in light of the demographic evolution.[24]

As regards the number of educational establishments, the pattern was characterized by a sharp reduction in all the PIS municipalities, with the exception of Vila de Rei. In fact, in the latter

[21] Pupils enrolled in the 1st cycle of basic education (regular education).

[22] Percentage ratio between the number of pupils who did not pass to the next school year and the number of pupils enrolled in that same school year. It refers to the 1st Cycle of Basic Education (regular education).

[23] Public establishments, although the source does not specify their type.

[24] It may be useful to add that in PIS, between 2001 and 2011, Proença-a-Nova was one of the municipalities in which the sharpest fall in resident population was observed (Portugal, 2002 and 2012). On the other hand, during the same period, Vila de Rei was the only municipality to record resident population growth, albeit rather timid (Portugal, 2002 and 2012). If the analysis is extended to the last decade, using the 2019 data already provided on the PORDATA website for this purpose (available at: https://www.pordata.pt), the same trend may be observed, i.e., Proença-a-Nova is still among the municipalities that continue to see a decline in resident population, while Vila Rei municipality is at the opposite end of the spectrum, with a minimal decline in resident population. Moreover, preliminary data from the 2021 census confirms the loss of resident population in all PIS municipalities, although not deemed significant (below two digits) in Sertã and Vila de Rei (respectively, -7.1% and -5.1% compared to the previous census). See the INE [National Statistics Office] website (available at https://www.ine.pt).

case, the network remained stable (only two public schools) throughout the decade. It should also be noted that at this time the private network expression in PIS was residual. For example, in Mação, there is no reference to any private school in the mentioned time span.[25] As anticipated in the analysis of Table 2, the important issue is to understand the extent to which the fall in the number of educational establishments was related to 1st cycle of basic education schools (as an effect of the school concentration measures), given that the source used does not break down the building types. However, in the case of the Proença-a-Nova municipality, it is possible to overcome this difficulty by using another source, namely the *Carta Educativa do Concelho de Proença-a-Nova*, published in 2015, which reports on the 1st cycle of basic education schools eliminated since the 1980s. Taking the established chronology into account, it may be noted that of the 13 schools closed down between the academic years of 2004/05 and 2014/15 (see Table 3) 12 were 1st cycle of basic education schools.[26] In the last academic year mentioned, there were only two schools (school centres) of this type, one with nine classrooms and another with three classrooms.

On the other hand, the analysis of the retention and drop-out rates per municipality confirms a previously considered idea, when the PIS universe was taken into account, namely that there is no cause and effect relationship between the progressive decrease in the number of educational establishments over the decade and the observed variation in those rates. However, it is important to note a pattern, which mirrors that observed in Table 2, in the transition from the 2011/12 academic year to the following year, which is the significant increase in the retention and drop-out rates. After breaking down the data, it is possible to see that in all the municipalities this rate increased as the years under analysis passed; this phenomenon is particularly evident in Oleiros (1% to 6.4%) and in Vila de Rei (1.8% to 7.9%). There is no explanation for these figures. An interpretation of local data would be enlightening, for example, related to municipal school support policies.

In the following section, the options taken throughout the decade from 2004/05 to 2014/15 regarding the extinction of schools with fewer than 21 pupils and the subsequent school concentration will be analysed. In the debate, not only does the assumed relevance of the extinction of educational establishments emerge, it should be noted that in the municipality of Oleiros seven schools had fewer than ten pupils in the academic year of 2005/06, but also a number of solutions regarding school concentration - for example, related to their location (only in the municipality or also in some parishes) and size.

Measures/school concentration options

In the initial years of the 21st century, namely after the creation of the Special Programme for the Rehabilitation of the 1st Cycle of Basic Education School Network in 2002, disapproval of the suppression of schools and the school concentration measures (especially in rural communities) became more expressive. The teachers' unions manifested these protests on behalf of the teachers, essentially arguing that school closures were based on economic rationality criteria. A more

[25] In this regard, see DGEEC, DSEE, DEEBS, publications *Regiões em números* [Regions in Figures]. Available at: https://www.dgeec.mec.pt/np4/home

[26] Two of these schools also had kindergarten, and the vast majority were single-class schools (*Carta Educativa do Concelho de Proença-a-Nova*, 2015). Other sources confirm that the reduction in the number of schools in PIS was mainly of 1st cycle of basic education schools, with a small school population. For a more precise idea, in 2005/06, in the municipality of Oleiros, of the nine existing 1st cycle schools, seven had less than ten pupils (*Carta Educativa do Concelho de Oleiros*, 2006).

contextualised argumentation can be read in the pages of the *Fenprof Magazine*[27] in 2005 and 2006. In fact, the absence of a strategic vision for the 1st cycle of basic education was a main criticism in these protests. On the other hand, it should be noted that Fenprof did not advocate the maintenance of all schools with fewer than 21 pupils. It argued that while some of the small schools could be closed down, the progressive reduction of the school network should include the construction of medium-sized schools (*Fenprof Magazine*, November 2005)[28]; otherwise, children in several parts of the country would have to spend long hours travelling on school transport. However, in February 2006, a new article brought to light the operational fragilities of many 1st cycle of basic education schools, especially in rural areas. In addition to its identification of the difficulties experienced, the text proposed a rehabilitation of the small village school. In essence, it argued that the "maintenance of the village school can contribute to the healthy development of the child, avoiding constant travel and cultural uprooting" (*Fenprof Magazine,* February 2006, p. 20). Nevertheless, if it proved necessary to close some of the schools, this process, according to Fenprof, would have to include: i) the establishment of a consensus with the population; ii) the safeguarding of the children's comfort and safety on school transport; iii) negotiations between the government and the trade union with regard to the rehabilitation of the school network; iv) the establishment of a dialogue between the trade union and the government on the rehabilitation of the school network; v) the establishment of a dialogue between the trade union and the government on the rehabilitation of the school network (*Fenprof Magazine*, February 2006). The following month, with the suggestive title "Government cuts schools. 1st cycle rehabilitation can wait!", the issue was back on the pages of the magazine. The aim was to contradict the idea, conveyed by the Ministry of Education, that the suppression of schools was related to reasons of an educational nature. This principle was questioned due to the fact that not only were schools being closed down, but also health centres, courts, maternity hospitals, among other public services – the real purpose was "to reduce the State to its minimum" (*Fenprof Magazine*, March 2006, p. 14). Thus, it was argued that the maintenance of small schools in some regions could help combat desertification. In this respect, João Serrão, an expert in Human Geography, makes some interesting remarks. In fact, on 29 August 2010, in an interview with the newspaper *Público*, suggestively entitled "Does the closure of a school kill a village or hasten the inevitable?", he bluntly stated the following:

> We can always say that the closure of a school only hastens the death of the location, because the lack of children would lead to the same result in a few years anyway. But this is only true because the Powers that be have long since completely abandoned the rural world. (*Público*, 29 August 2010).

He further alerted to the fact that the decision to close schools should be taken within the framework of multi-sectoral land planning policies, taking specific cases into consideration.[29] In this regard, in some situations, "the imbalance caused by the closure of a school can be fatal to years of work, carried out at a local level to combat desertification" (*Público*, 29 August 2010). He also warned against a pernicious idea, embraced by many municipalities: that desertification is combated by strengthening local government seats - the effect, he added, would be to suck in the rural population).

For the purpose of this research, it is important to understand how these issues were addressed by the municipalities, considering, in particular, those that integrated the area of PIS. In

[27] Official body of the National Teachers' Federation, affiliated to the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers, which, in turn, is closely associated with the Portuguese Communist Party. In the years under consideration (2005 and 2006), the 17th Constitutional Government of Portugal was in office, with a socialist majority in parliament.

[28] It should be noted that the *school centre* would only be legally established in 2007.

[29] It is worth mentioning that the emergence and development of social innovation (a broad concept) in rural areas may benefit from the combination (at different stages) of Bottom-up and Top-down strategies (Ferreiro et al., 2021).

this respect, the municipal educational policy papers reveal important information. As already mentioned, they were privileged municipal policy instruments. Indeed, issues as relevant as the definition of the education and training supply network, the prospective analysis of the system, the management of educational facilities, the process of grouping schools, among others, are embodied in these policy papers.[30] Interestingly, they also permitted the participation of several local actors.[31]

The *corpus* of the source policy papers consists of four documents (relative to the following PIS municipalities: Oleiros, Vila de Rei, Mação and Proença-a-Nova).[32] Most of these documents were approved between 2006 and 2007 (therefore, still in force); the Policy Paper of Proença-a-Nova is an exception as it was updated in February 2015.[33] As for the structure of these five instruments, they share a common framework[34], namely: i) concept, purpose and guiding principles of the policy paper; ii) socio-economic and demographic characterisation of the municipality; iii) characterisation and evolution of the educational system (including a prospective vision); iv) rehabilitation criteria for the school network; v) monitoring of the policy paper. Particular attention will be given to the prospective analysis and the rehabilitation criteria for the school network, in order to understand the rationale behind the adoption of the concentration measures.

The analysis began with the *Carta Educativa do Concelho de Oleiros*, approved in October 2006. One of the important topics is the prospective vision for the academic year 2010/11, namely supply-demand in the 1st cycle of basic education. In 2005/06, of the nine schools in the municipality, seven had fewer than ten pupils. The forecast for the 2010/11 academic year points to a reduction in the number of pupils and teaching establishments.[35] Consequently, given the expected demand, the Policy Paper proposes the following network rehabilitation: five educational establishments, with notable concentration in the municipality seat. In fact, the school centre that was already there would provide five classrooms, and it was estimated that the other schools, all located in different parishes and with a single class, would be occupied by between six and 15 pupils. It should be noted that in the academic year in which the Policy Paper was approved (2006/07), two schools were closed down (Mosteiro and Madeirã parishes). In the first case, the option was taken to transfer the school population to the municipal seat and, in the second, to the parish of Sobral. Yet even considering the rarefaction of the school population, belief in the school as the identity factor and "symbol of progress" of rural communities, to use the words of Rui Canário (2008, p. 34), appears to be absent. The main focus was clearly the urban area of the municipality. However, it is worth noting the arguments used to support the school concentration measures. The Policy Paper states that it is important "to concentrate the supply of 1st cycle education in the most relevant population centres and with greater demographic dynamics"; and, at the same time, "to accompany this concentration with a rehabilitation of the supply, namely at the level of facilities, support infrastructures and school equipment" (*Carta Educativa do Concelho de Oleiros*, October 2006, p. 84). It is even understood, given the demography and the government's guidelines, that the closure of the1st cycle schools is inevitable. The fact that the growing urban concentration of the population is considered a strategic vehicle for the socio-economic

[30] In this regard, see aforementioned Decree- Law no. 7/2003, of 15 January.

[31] Once again it should be noted that the policy papers are prepared by the municipal council and approved by the municipal board of education.

[32] Despite concerted efforts, it was not possible to locate the Policy Paper of Sertã, which was approved in 2006.

[33] The law determines a review of policy papers upon the opening or closure of an educational establishment. This also applies to any non-conformity in the school network. However, a review of this instrument is mandatory every five years (Decree- Law no. 7/2003, of 15 January, Article 20).

[34] Resulting partly from the provisions laid down in Decree- Law no. 7/2003, of 15 January, Article 18.

[35] It is estimated that in 2010/11, the municipality had 109 pupils (*Carta Educativa do Concelho de Oleiros,* October 2006). This figure is very close to the actual figure. See Table 3.

development of the municipality is also relevant. Consequently, and to a large extent, reasons of this nature were behind the rehabilitation of the school network.

In the case of the municipality of Mação, the respective Policy Paper also emphasises the question of demography; this, unsurprisingly, is also the case in the other PIS municipalities. On the date of approval of the document (January 2007), there were eight 1st cycle of basic education schools[36]; only one of the parishes did not have a school. However, it was generally understood that the situation in the parishes could change due to migratory movements within the municipality itself. There were some interesting assumptions regarding the rehabilitation of the school network. In fact, it was understood that the effective benefits of eliminating schools needed to be well assessed, since, given the territorial extent of Mação municipality (surface of 400.82 Km2), the generalised use of school transport would carry some degree of risk for the children. It also emphasised the following idea: "the number of pupils is an important indicator, but it should not be exclusive or determinant [for the closure of a school]" (*Carta Educativa do Concelho de Mação*, January 2007, p. 75). The proposal for the rehabilitation of the network contained in the Policy Paper echoes this purpose. Indeed, it proposes the extinction of two schools (with five and 12 pupils, respectively, in the parishes of Aboboreira and Vales de Cardigos). However, the intention is expressed to keep schools with 14, 16 and 18 pupils open.[37] The latter decision was made due to the foreseeable evolution of the school population (without significant changes in the medium term, according to predictions), as well as to the good quality of the facilities. On the other hand, it should be noted that the arguments for closing the school with five pupils were not only related to school attendance. Indeed, the fact that the children would have to travel every day to the School of Mação (municipality seat)[38] to attend curriculum enrichment activities was taken into consideration. Thus, with the extinction of the school in Aboboreira, the transfer of these pupils would only serve to anchor an existing practice. Moreover, the school of Mação would be assumed, "in the medium term, as a reference for the whole southern part of the municipality", receiving children from various parishes (*Carta Educativa do Concelho de Mação*, January 2007, p. 79). The idea was not, therefore, to concentrate all the schools (and pupils) in the municipality seat, but into a more integrated solution to that observed in the Policy Paper of Oleiros, to constitute "three educational poles that would cover the whole territory homogeneously" (*Carta Educativa do Concelho de Mação*, January 2007, p. 79).

Moving on to an analysis of the *Carta Educativa do Concelho de Vila de Rei*, approved in December 2007, it should be noted that this is the least populated and smallest municipality (PIS geographical area). When the document was drafted, the only educational establishment in the centre of Vila de Rei admitted pupils from all the parishes (Vila de Rei, S. João do Peso and Fundada) and the various levels of schooling (from the 1st cycle of Basic Education to secondary). This was the *Escola Básica Integrada do Centro de Portugal* [Integrated Basic School of the Centre of Portugal] where six classrooms were allocated to the 1st Cycle. In light of the above, it is not surprising that the school in rural areas is not referred to in the Policy Paper. On the other hand, the stability of the network in the decade from 2004/05 to 2014/15 is particularly notable (see Table 3). The estimated evolution of the school population for 2011 was based on the following

[36] 226 pupils frequented the eight schools (see Table 3); the same figure is referred to in the Policy Paper. In light of this last document, it should be noted that 115 pupils attended the school in Mação (municipality seat).

[37] There is one idea which merits particular attention. Teaching in rural schools, often with only one teacher and several classes, is certainly not easy from the point of view of pedagogical organisation. In fact, one need only bear in mind the following example of the previously mentioned school attended by 18 pupils (Ortiga parish). Their distribution among the classes was as follows: 1st year, 2 pupils; 2nd year, 7 pupils; 3rd year, 5 pupils; 4th year, 4 pupils (*Carta Educativa do Concelho de Mação*, January 2007, p. 79).

[38] It is worth mentioning that the parish of Aboboreira is contiguous to that of Mação.

assumptions: i) constant birth rate; ii) no migration. School attendance predicted to be between 157 and 176 pupils; higher than the 136 pupils registered (enrolled) in the 2006/07 academic year (see Table 3). Nor is it surprising that this figure was revised upwards, considering that the document in question conveys a degree of optimism; it even assumes "some capacity to attract the population" (*Carta Educativa do Concelho de Vila de Rei*, December 2007, p. 55). It is worth recalling that between 2001 and 2011, Vila de Rei was the only PIS municipality to register growth (albeit slight) in the resident population.[39] In this regard, the school network rehabilitation proposal considers the need for the *Escola Básica Integrada do Centro de Portugal* to have three more classrooms for the 1st Cycle. Furthermore, it is argued that the pre-school network should be integrated in that of the 1st cycle of basic education, ensuring the coordination and complementarity of the two levels. There is also a clear focus on curriculum enrichment activities and on the principle of "full-time school" (ensuring the pupils' transport and meals). In short, the idea was to continue to provide public education to all the pupils of the municipality in a single building (the *Escola Básica Integrada do Centro de Portugal*).

The last document to be analysed is the *Carta Educativa do Concelho de Proença-a-Nova*, approved, as already stated, in 2015. This document shows that the municipality adopted the guidelines of the Ministry of Education regarding the rehabilitation of the school network; however, it did not refrain from criticising the Ministry of Education for failing to deliver a contextualised educational policy. In fact, the municipality had followed the Resolution of the Council of Ministers no. 44/2010, of 1 June, which aimed to achieve three main objectives, namely: i) to adapt the school network to 12 years of schooling for all pupils; ii) to adapt the size and conditions of the schools to promote educational success and combat pupil dropout; iii) to promote the rationalization of school clusters in order to foster the development of a common educational project, coordinating the various education levels and cycles. However, it was also sensitive to other topics referred to in the aforementioned Resolution, namely, the eradication of isolated educational establishments, as well as the assumption that all the pupils used the spaces with a canteen, library and computer room, among others. In a more operational manner, the municipality of Proença-a-Nova took into account the demographic and development dynamics, the travel distances and the transport network, also considering use of the existing school facilities (*Carta Educativa do Concelho de Proença-a-Nova*, February 2015). However, it criticised (without significant consequences) the most decisive criterion for closing schools, i.e., the number of enrolled pupils being lower than 21, as adduced in the following argumentation:

> Beyond the rigidity of the number, which can sometimes be made more manageable, depending on supporting elements, the idea remains that we are attacking the effects and not the causes. The criterion appears to be inadequate both for the reality of most of the inland regions of the country and for the reality of the municipality, since, in many cases, only the school(s) in the parish seat can attain those numbers permanently. (*Carta Educativa do Concelho de Proença-a-Nova*, February 2015, p. 119-120).

Two ideas are difficult to reconcile, as may be seen in the Policy Paper. On the one hand, the school network supply needs to ensure proximity, thus avoiding inconvenient travel; and, on the other hand, the concentration of the educational supply in urban areas (school centres) emerges as a means to ensure the quality of the educational services provided. The solutions adopted clearly overvalue the latter idea. In fact, it is argued that the reconfiguration of the school network should follow the demographic dynamics of the Proença-a-Nova municipality, which leaned towards increased urban concentration. Moreover, according to the prospective balance for 2021, the number of pupils enrolled in the 1st cycle would continue to decrease in the municipality, despite the increasing demand for education in urban centres. This trend is even regarded as a strategic

[39] It should be noted that the anticipated increase in the number of pupils in 2011 was not observed. See Table 3.

vehicle for the development of the municipality. Consequently, the reconfiguration of the school network stems mainly from an economic rationale. In short, it would be a matter of: i) "concentrating the supply of 1st cycle education in the most relevant population centre with the highest level of socioeconomic dynamics"; ii) rehabilitating the "supply, namely at the level of facilities, support infrastructures and school equipment" (*Carta Educativa do Concelho de Proença-a-Nova*, February 2015, p. 126). As a result, the closure of one of the two existing school centres in the municipality is being considered, which would mean that only one (of the four existing parishes) parish would be left with a 1st cycle of basic education establishment. The vision that identifies the existing school network - the symbolic effect of the school, as it were - as a factor in the creation of new dynamics in the rural environment is clearly absent. In fact, not only is the idea of progress and economic development associated with the urban space, but also the determinism of the minimum number of pupils to keep a school open is still predominant - between 2004/05 and 2014/15, 12 1st cycle of basic education schools were closed in the municipality of Proença-a-Nova (for having fewer than 21 pupils). In short, what is recommended in the Policy Paper (and in that of Oleiros and Vila de Rei) clashes with the philosophy of the afore-mentioned National Programme for the Upgrading of the 1st Cycle of Basic Education and Pre-School Education Network (2007). In other words, the idea was to combat overcrowding in populous urban areas and avoid rarefaction of the network in rural areas (Azevedo, 2014).

Final considerations

The aim of this paper was to accompany the redefinition process of the 1st cycle of basic education school network in the geographical area of PIS, within a well-defined timeframe (2004/05 to 2014/15). Given the dramatic scarcity of the school population in the geographical area under consideration - the effect of an economic-driven development pattern based on industry and urban space, thus strangling the rural economy and promoting rural exodus - both the central government (inflexible towards the minimum number of pupils required to keep a school open) and local actors were unable to ensure equal opportunities for school access and success in rural areas. In general, the advocated school concentration measures conveyed the idea that in the urban centres (in particular, in the municipality seats) it was possible to guarantee better educational conditions, disregarding the importance of the connection to the communities and children's socialization modes. Thus, there was a clear effort to rationalize education - also in terms of the scientific organisation of teachers' work (materialised in the transition from unitarian schools to school centres) - which disregards the cultural values of a rural world in transformation. In fact, what was defended was that the school network should accompany the areas with the greatest demographic dynamics and, consequently, the greatest economic potential. Even so, in the geographical area of PIS, there are different municipal realities. For example, the municipalities where the school identity factor appears to be lower are Oleiros (the closure of unitarian schools was, in fact, considered inevitable) and Proença-a-Nova. Conversely, Mação was not only against the criterion that the number of pupils would determine the closure of an educational establishment (it accepted keeping schools open with 14, 16 and 18 pupils), it also discarded the idea of concentrating all the schools in the municipality. However, it is important to stress that these considerations should be interpreted with some caution. In fact, educational policy papers are, to a certain extent, manifestations of interest. This means that, sometimes, the evolution observed on the ground does not correspond to the prospective vision set forth in these documents. Nevertheless, there is no doubt - and it even remains as an image of the rapid regression of the rural world - that a drastic reduction was seen in the number of pupils and unitarian schools in the context and decade under study. Additionally, considering the percentage loss of the total PIS population between 2001 and 2011 (note 22.22% in the 0-14 age bracket alone), and to repeat the slogan, it may be said that the closure of a school really kills a village.

However, there are still unanswered questions and many more to be formulated. Regarding the former, a final note on the retention and dropout rates. Even though there is no perceptible relationship between the fall in the number of schools (basically, the progressive suppression of unitarian schools and the construction of school centres) and the variation in the mentioned rates, an indicator which, as already mentioned, is complex and dependent on many variables, the idea remains that the school centre typology does not appear to have increased the educational capacity of the schools. It should also be underlined that in PIS, during the decade under consideration, the retention and dropout percentage was often below the national average. As for the questions that remain to be formulated (and to be researched), the following may be considered: i) did the consequences of the closure of schools, as a result of government determination, compromise the development of inland Portugal more than the costs associated with their maintenance? ii) did any entity consider this question? iii) was the relationship between school success/ failure and the educational policy measures implemented (school centres) evaluated?

I will conclude with a few considerations. It should certainly be remembered that the launch of the education charters in 2003 (together with the municipal education councils), was to lay the foundations for an effective, and comprehensive, decentralization. However, there was no shared management of educational provision between the Ministry's central services and local organizations (Cruz, 2012). In other words, the decentralization process has not led to greater accountability (and monitoring) at the peripheral level, particularly by the municipalities. In fact, a centralist vision of the education system remained, as the present study within the PIS region fully illustrates. It makes perfect sense, to sum up my argument with an idea sustained by Justino Magalhães. In analyzing the historical reconstitution of the action of municipalities in education, the author speaks of a "long modernization, in which the coastal and urban overlapped irreversibly" (Magalhães, 2014, p. 191).

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