

# Understanding Leaderships' Role in Teachers' Professional Development – A Secondary Publication

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**Abstract:** In an increasingly connected and interdependent society, collaborative culture emerges as an effective and efficient answer to overcome the complexities that teachers face daily. In turn, the teaching activity requires a continuous reflection on practice, involving the teacher in a constant search for professional development, as a reflective researcher. Now, the action of teaching, understood as a craft and an art that materializes in practice, requires grounding (specific knowledge and skills) and theoretical-practical reflection, aimed at improving the teaching and learning of students. For this purpose, the school must be thought of as a learning organization that expands and innovates with the development of professionals who work in it, which requires a new mode of operation from the leaders, the creation of favorable conditions for the continuous questioning of practices and a culture that values permanent learning and improvement. The study carried out in a group of schools in the Greater Lisbon area had, among others, the following objectives: (1) to identify the perceptions of leaders about supervision and collaboration; and (2) to understand the role of leaders in the professional development of teachers. From a methodological point of view, the investigation assumes the design of a case study, with a mixed approach, based on eight individual interviews with top leaders and twenty-one questionnaire surveys, applied to class directors. The results show different understandings of the concept of collaboration and the role of leaders in the professional development of teachers, perceived as an unfinished process and under permanent reconstruction.

**Keywords:** Collaboration; Professional development; Leadership; Supervision

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## 1. Introduction

The study aimed to identify the understanding of the principal, vice principals, and department coordinators regarding supervision and collaboration and to perceive their role in teachers' professional development. The research aimed to deepen and unveil the concepts of supervision and collaboration, a relevant binomial recognized as two core practices conducive to the quality of teaching and teachers' professional development. In the current educational context, increasingly complex and heterogeneous, collaborative supervision, as a formative, reflective, and transformative strategy, becomes pertinent both in sharing practices and problem-

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solving and in promoting teachers' professional development. From this perspective, teachers' professional development stems from the idea of learning as a dynamic, constant, personal phenomenon resulting from interaction with colleagues, joint reflection, and sharing experiences.

In this regard, Decree-Law No. 55/2018 (ME) emphasizes the importance of cooperation among teachers, the valorization of collaborative and interdisciplinary work, and situations of co-teaching or the formation of pedagogical teams, as these are the expression and condition for the implementation of collaborative work among teachers <sup>[1]</sup>. Similarly, the Profile of Students Exiting Compulsory Education refers to the development of interdisciplinary projects and the importance of collaborative work in school, highlighting the role of leadership in organizing and implementing these educational changes.

This study grounds collaborative supervision in management roles, embodied in the figures of the principal and department coordinators who, in this sense, are responsible for supervision and collaboration actions, which directly commit them to the implementation of these practices and to changing teachers' ways of working. Given the current reality, the need for new dynamics in schools, and current legislation, the following objectives were defined, among others: (1) to identify leadership perceptions regarding supervision and collaboration; (2) to perceive the role of leadership in teachers' professional development.

The article frames the study, from a theoretical perspective, notably clarifying the concepts of supervision and collaboration, and highlights collaborative supervision as a device in the service of professional development, focusing on leadership action. It explains and substantiates the methodological choices and presents the analysis of data from the eight individual interviews with leadership. In the conclusions, the results are reflected upon in light of the theoretical perspectives addressed.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.1. Concepts: supervision and collaboration**

The study adopted an approach to supervision from an integrative multilateral perspective, meaning creative and constructive, democratic, participatory, and collaborative supervision focused on the quality of management as a whole <sup>[2]</sup>.

Similarly, Gordon highlighted the clinical supervision process as a fundamental tool for the improvement of teaching and learning, an action of continuous accountability and action research by teachers <sup>[3]</sup>. It also considered supervision as allowing the sharing of more positive alternative experiences and strengthening a professional community that develops common values, realizing them through collective action.

In this investigative journey, a multifaceted meaning of the term supervision is recovered, with various connotative meanings, some of them resulting from its historical heritage, relating it to the idea of "inspecting, monitoring, controlling, evaluating, and imposing" <sup>[4]</sup>, associated with a hierarchical relationship between the trainee and the supervisor. On the other hand, Alarcão and Canha differentiated between two modes of supervision: formative, stimulating, favoring "the development of people's and institutions' learning," and "inspective, monitoring, emphasizing control," assuming a more preventive or punitive dimension <sup>[5]</sup>. The same authors clarified that supervision, in its evolutionary line, is characterized as "a process of monitoring an activity and the person or persons carrying it out, aimed at facilitating the successful completion of the activity, the development of competence, and the satisfaction of the person(s) performing it" <sup>[5]</sup>.

In this exploration of different meanings, supervision is considered as an intentional and continuous action involving a "broader context of the school, as a place and time of learning for everyone [...] and for itself as a qualifying organization that also learns and develops" <sup>[6]</sup>. New supervisory trends should be understood in a new educational context, as a necessary action for the construction and development of teacher knowledge, as

teaching professionals, “with an orientation toward guiding, formative, transformative, interactive, reflective, and empowering intentions”<sup>[5]</sup>. Therefore, supervision emerges as a strategic action plan, aiming at promoting academic success, as an intrinsic need of the teacher, a requirement for building, growth, and updating professional knowledge and action, aiming at improving pedagogical practices.

Regarding collaboration among teachers, it was understood in this study as a means to promote their professional development, the quality of teaching, and student learning, a privileged way of working to transform the institutions into true professional learning communities<sup>[7]</sup>. The culture of learning stems from shared work among various teachers and leaders, from an investigative and reflective stance on professional practices, and attitudes fostering professional learning. In this regard, Hargreaves emphasized collaboration as “one of the most promising paradigms that has emerged in the postmodern age [...] as an articulating and integrating principle of action, planning, culture, development, organization, and research”<sup>[8]</sup>. Similarly, Alarcão and Canha added that collaboration requires the will to accomplish with others. It implies trust in the other, valuing their knowledge, believing that with them, it is possible to go further<sup>[5]</sup>. It also implies humility in valuing our own knowledge and experience, admitting and desiring that they be modified and enriched by collaborative encounters<sup>[5]</sup>.

Alarcão adopted the term “collaborative interaction” to emphasize the underlying interactive dynamics<sup>[9]</sup>. According to the author, these two associated concepts “create a new synergy and acquire a more potent meaning”<sup>[9]</sup>. Lima solidified the concept of professional collaboration as “the ideal way to ensure the professional development of teachers throughout their careers, excellent learning for students, and the transformation of schools into authentic learning communities,” because “collaboration is not justified by itself: it is a means to achieve a nobler end; a richer and more meaningful learning for students”<sup>[10]</sup>.

## **2.2. Supervision and collaboration: a powerful combination in building professional knowledge**

Researchers who have delved into the theme of pedagogical supervision unanimously advocate for the collaborative dimension, emphasizing its contribution to teachers’ personal and professional development. Thus, supervision and collaboration should be perceived as two accomplice concepts, fundamental in the service of development and the quality of teaching<sup>[5]</sup>.

The concept of supervision has evolved in its understanding, influenced by the perception of the need for continuous training and its broad conceptualization of professional development processes, acquiring a more reflective and self-formative dimension. In this vein, various authors have evolved in their interpretations, driven by the challenges facing schools, the research conducted in this area, and the demands confronting teachers – those of continuous collaborative learning, based on practice inquiry, self-assessment, and shared pedagogical leadership. Gordon regarded supervision as a necessity for political action, teacher leadership, and schools that promote professional development<sup>[3]</sup>.

Therefore, systematic thought on formative and collaborative supervision is a recent concept that has been gaining considerable importance in teachers’ discourse and regulatory frameworks themselves. According to Alarcão and Roldão, this collaborative, self-reflective, and self-formative relevance gained prominence “as teachers began to gain confidence in the relevance of their professional knowledge and in their ability to make their voice heard as researchers of their own practice and builders of the specific knowledge inherent to their social function”<sup>[11]</sup>. Alarcão and Roldão considered that “when reflection is collaborative and collegial in nature, and focuses on investigative activity, problem-solving, analysis of educational situations, and interactions in diverse contexts, it presents itself as a strategy of great formative potential”<sup>[11]</sup>.

This collaborative dynamic, converging with improved learning outcomes, is advocated by Bolívar in the sense of “understanding the school as a Professional Learning Community of teachers” and achieving sustained change <sup>[12]</sup>. We can, therefore, observe “evolutionary traits towards the promotion of professional development in a less hierarchical and more collaborative perspective, less guided by techniques and norms and more based on questioning, reflection, and personal assumption of decisions taken,” which cannot be dissociated from “conceptions of training, professional development, evaluation, and quality, management concepts, institution/organization, nor can they be dissociated from the values and principles that, at a given moment, guide society” <sup>[5]</sup>. According to Alarcão and Canha, “collaborating is thus a tool that serves for the development of individuals and the activities in which they engage, and presumably also for the institutions in which they are inserted” <sup>[5]</sup>. In the same vein, Day emphasized that the concept of collaboration underlies a very strong potential for the professional development of teachers, as it enables education professionals to work together and test new strategies that enrich each one’s practice <sup>[13]</sup>.

Reinforcing this idea of lifelong learning, the document “The Future of Learning: Preparing for Change,” published by the European Commission <sup>[14]</sup>, presents a future vision of education, highlighting three aspects that will characterize it: personalization (person-centered learning), collaboration (learning in a social context), and informalization (lifelong learning, including informal).

According to Alarcão and Canha, supervision and collaboration are two concepts that intersect and combine with the intention of promoting development, quality, and transformation; furthermore, in contexts of collaborative training and learning, aimed at professional evolution, supervision emerges as an accomplice in this purpose <sup>[5]</sup>.

### **2.3. The role of leadership in professional development**

Schools, as organizations, constitute spaces where interactions, communication, and learning are fundamental, and therefore, it is the responsibility of top leadership to create favorable working conditions for continuous questioning of practices and to help develop in schools an environment and culture that values continuous learning and improvement, creating opportunities for teachers to learn collaboratively. In this regard, Moreira highlighted the importance of supervision as a promoter of reflection, transformation, and development: “In a democratic, situational-contextualized, and dialogical approach, supervision reveals itself in its humanity, ‘empties’ itself of authoritarian power, creates conditions for the exercise of freedom of expression and critical thinking, opening up space for the school, as a learning community and space for individual and collective transformation, to emerge” <sup>[15]</sup>.

However, Fullan and Hargreaves pointed out that professional professionalism is not limited to “encouraging teachers to engage in a variety of continuous training actions. [...] shared leadership and access to resources are closely related [...]. The availability of resources, especially human ones, intended for collaboration, stimulates initiative and leadership” <sup>[16]</sup>. The behavioral attitude of the principal leads to the development of the school and the professionals working there, and their action is more effective when “always favoring collaboration” and involving teachers in decision-making <sup>[16]</sup>. According to Day, principals “must be leaders who articulate a global vision, who promote the sharing of ideas, and are committed to evolutionary planning, dealing with culture, development, and change” <sup>[13]</sup>, as the “responsibility for the professional learning culture of the school is the central aspect of the cultural and educational role of school leaders. It is absolutely necessary to promote teacher development and, through this, school improvement” <sup>[13]</sup>.

Day also highlighted the role of the principal in supporting the professional development of teachers, and “the main factors that allow assessing the effectiveness of school principals are their interpersonal skills

and learning orientations”<sup>[13]</sup>. In this continuity, the principal plays a fundamental role in creating cultures of professional learning by encouraging “teachers to engage systematically in individual and collective learning, formal and informal, individually and with others”<sup>[13]</sup>. Indeed, the responsibility “for the professional learning culture of the school is a central aspect of the cultural and educational role of principal leadership. It is absolutely necessary to promote teacher development and, through this, school improvement”<sup>[13]</sup>.

In turn, middle leadership (department coordinators) also play a crucial role in the development of collaborative supervisory practices, which requires, according to Formosinho and Machado, that their action focuses “more on creating an atmosphere in which action takes place than on leading the action itself of each team, more on promoting the emergence and affirmation of intermediate teams than on directing all actions of the teams”<sup>[17]</sup>.

Furthermore, the school, as a reflective organization, should emphasize the importance of the roles that department coordinators play in the functioning of the education system and, from there, “create a new spirit that, precisely thanks to this perception of our growing interdependencies, thanks to a shared analysis of the risks and challenges of the future, leads to the realization of common projects or, alternatively, to intelligent and appealing management of inevitable conflicts”<sup>[18]</sup>.

In the same vein, Fullan and Hargreaves stated that the development of collaborative cultures requires leadership that shares decision-making and emphasize that “it is not the charismatic and innovative leader who advances collaborative cultures; on the contrary, it is a more subtle type of leadership that makes activities meaningful, so that they participate in them”<sup>[16]</sup>. They further add that “the basic role of school leadership is to lead the development of collaborative schools in which teachers are given the possibility and capacity” to share experiences, openly dialogue with colleagues, and grow professionally<sup>[16]</sup>. Department coordinators should activate this sharing of experiences, stimulate positive professional interactions, and promote a joint work dynamic and training actions in schools. Assuming the role of supervisors, they can positively influence the regulation of pedagogical practices through their critical and transformative actions, contributing to the construction of an educational culture more committed to professional development processes. According to Alarcão and Tavares, supervisors should be facilitators or leaders of learning communities because their main function is to promote or support contexts of formative and transformative reflection that, translating into school improvement, have repercussions on the professional development of educational agents [...] and on the learning of students who find a place, time, and context for learning in it<sup>[19]</sup>.

Alarcão and Roldão also highlighted the figure of the coordinator/supervisor as an element that influences the process of socialization, as they contribute to “expanding the vision of teaching, stimulating self-knowledge and reflection on practices, transmitting knowledge useful for professional practice” and for the “creation and sustainability of environments that promote construction and professional development on a sustained path of progressive development of professional autonomy”<sup>[11]</sup>. In this change process, the dimension of distributed, shared, and participative leadership is crucial because it commits and holds teachers accountable and is strategically fruitful for professional development.

Some authors argued that the leadership of department coordinators is the right path to developing successful schools, as they support teachers in the classroom and foster quality practices, teacher support, and coordination of teaching activities that lead to the personal and professional growth of teachers<sup>[20-22]</sup>. The coordinator is a leader with skills to, together with their peers, contribute to improving teaching and the quality of the school, functions listed in Decree-Law No. 115-A/98, of May 4<sup>[23]</sup>, and in Regulatory Decree 10/99, of July 21, art. 5<sup>[24]</sup>, which define their competencies, reinforcing those aimed at improving and developing professional learning communities.

### 3. Methodological choices

The study was conducted in a cluster of schools in the Greater Lisbon area and adopted a mixed methodological approach to address the objectives <sup>[25]</sup>. For data collection, we used the semi-structured interview survey, which allows us to “investigate phenomena in all their complexity and a natural context” and gather descriptive and detailed knowledge from data related to “people, places, and conversations” <sup>[26]</sup>. It fits into a case study as it adapts to the exploration of a “limited system” in terms of time and depth, in a specific context, using various sources of information and confronting different participants <sup>[25,26]</sup>.

The semi-structured interview was conducted with the principal, two deputy principals, and five department coordinators. With this intentional strategy, we aimed to obtain distinct and varied responses, in line with the defined objectives, and to make some comparisons, as advocated by Bogdan and Biklen, who stated that “in semi-structured interviews, one can be certain of obtaining comparable data among the various subjects” <sup>[26]</sup>.

The treatment and analysis of the data were carried out based on predefined questions, and once the information was collected, it was analyzed and interpreted. In this regard, Amado argued that, due to their “open and flexible nature, qualitative plans produce a vast amount of descriptive information that needs to be organized and reduced to enable the description and interpretation of the phenomenon under study” <sup>[27]</sup>, allowing the researcher to uncover what the data “contain.” In the process of categorization, we sought to “gather a greater amount of information at the expense of schematization and thus correlate classes of events to organize them” <sup>[28]</sup>. Content analysis and treatment of the results were carried out based on inferences and interpretation of the data.

### 4. Results: crossed perspectives

Of the three interviewees, the principal (Dirt) and two deputy principals (Adj1, Adj2), two are male and one is female, aged between 50 and 60; they hold a master’s degree, with extensive experience in the field of teaching, but only two years of experience in the position of principal. The principal, a master’s degree holder in School Administration and Management, stated that he considers this role a challenge and an experience that allows him to “put into practice what he has learned.” Regarding the professional experiences essential for the performance of the position, he emphasized “knowledge of students, teachers, and staff, knowledge beyond the school boundaries,” which demonstrates his comprehensive view of the position, associated with an awareness of the complexity of its functions, which, according to Fullan and Hargreaves, “can and should be strongly active and vital for effective leadership in the context of school culture. [...] such qualities provide routine opportunities for principals to express what they value, and what they can contribute to the school, without imposing their perspectives as threatening orders” <sup>[16]</sup>. This implies knowing the context, the school, the teachers, and the educational community.

The department coordinators (CdA, CdB, CdC, CdD) are members of the school group, with an experienced professional profile. Two participants hold a master’s degree, with extensive experience in teaching and the role of coordinator; only one has two years of experience. They also emphasize the importance attributed to training for the performance of the position, particularly in the areas of pedagogical supervision, leadership, interpersonal relations, and collaborative work practices. They recognize, in addition to training in pedagogical supervision, the critical importance of leadership and conflict management skills.

Regarding the first objective, the understanding of leadership regarding the concepts of supervision and collaboration, the principal and deputy principals consider supervisory practice fundamental, as the

“development of teaching practices [...] sharing experiences” [Dirt] and associate it with “collaborative work, peer work inside and outside the classroom to [...] monitor [...] to improve/change teaching practice” [Adj1]. They also highlight supervisory practices because they contribute “to the professional improvement of teachers, of educational establishments, through the sharing of new experiences” [Adj2].

Although department coordinators converge on the importance of implementing supervisory practices, they consider them “important, if understood, not as part of an evaluative and regulatory process, but as a way of providing moments of joint analysis and reflection on practices and results” [CdA]. This same coordinator states that they should not have “a merely regulatory character, but [be] a continuous and dynamic process, based on sharing and joint analysis of the work carried out in the disciplinary groups, in identifying and resolving any difficulties.” Supervision is conceived as “a mediation process for continuous teacher evolution, aiming at professional progression/fulfillment, with an impact on the educational community” [CdD].

Regarding the concept of collaboration, there is convergence in the perception of the participants, highlighting at the same time the constraints at the structural, organizational, institutional, and cultural levels. The principal points out this difficulty by stating that “there are always adverse elements to change” and highlights some constraints that may hinder teamwork such as “the elaboration of teachers’ schedules; architectural spaces: rooms for collaborative work and computer equipment.” Although he emphasizes the importance of intermediate leadership in the development of collaborative work, arguing that “with the work and dedication of middle management, this situation can be reversed” [Dirt], he does not specify how and under what circumstances it can be achieved.

The department coordinators mention the following collaborative activities: development of lesson plans; development of assessment tools and educational materials; and preparation of the Annual Activities Plan. The activities take place in class councils, in disciplinary groups, and in the department. Two examples of collaborative activity are “exchange of materials and opinions” and “distribution of tasks,” which suggests that the collaborative practices listed are limited to joint practical activities, being very much based “on spontaneous generation and precariously and casually” [CdD].

Regarding the perception of teacher professional development, we believe there is a convergence of understandings. The principal advocates “continuous lifelong learning, but [it] should focus on the teacher; it should lead them to reflect on their practices and methodological strategies to improve the teaching and learning process”; thus, the “main responsible for their professional development is the teacher themselves.” [Adj1] emphasizes “increased motivation if their [the teacher’s] efforts are recognized by the institution and the community.”

Department coordinators perceive professional development as a “lifelong learning process,” with the teacher “having to be willing to invest” [CdC]. This interviewee uses the metaphor of “a semi-straight line that has a beginning but no end,” suggesting that it consists of lifelong learning. Another coordinator explicitly expresses their understanding of professional development: “ability to analyze and reflect on their practices, systematically and together with their peers [...] to assess results; reformulate strategies and ways of acting” [CdA].

## 5. Conclusions

The results obtained reveal a perception of leadership that is somewhat uninformed and superficial regarding the concepts of supervision and collaboration, showing a heterogeneity of perspectives, even though their impact on professional development is acknowledged. The results also indicate that supervisory practices do not

exist, and collaborative work practices occur in some groups occasionally, casually and informally, but do not persist in a generalized format. Recognizing some factors that hinder the implementation of these practices, they must be improved and continuously realized because we believe that any change requires a clear understanding of its purposes and actions, cemented through reflection and collaboration. In this dimension, we argue that professional action cannot currently be limited to an individual way of working because the complexity of educational situations demands collaborative work and reflective practice; hence the relevance of supervision, aiming at the personal and professional development of teachers, involving mutual collaboration and assistance among peers.

We are aware that establishing collaborative work in schools is not always easy because it presupposes that participants engage, take responsibility, and commit to the objectives and educational project. In addition to the aforementioned, a fundamental requirement is demanded, that of trust, allowing participants to have openness to question, present ideas, and accept each other's actions, in an environment of respect for everyone's work, in a dynamic, creative, and changing process, which is not always an easy process, considering the individualistic culture that persists in the Cluster. However, department coordinators, as pedagogical leaders in the performance of their roles, fulfilling the competencies involved in this action, can trigger collaborative practices by creating spaces for change and learning communities.

Dialogue and questioning about practices lead to the professional development of each individual and the collective of teachers, resulting from collaborative learning, based on pedagogical, dialogical, contextualized, and reflective leadership. However, for this culture to materialize, it seems equally essential that, for the exercise of the position, leadership participates in specialized training on supervision and collaboration practices, recognizing that these strongly reflect on the professional growth of teachers. Indeed, collaborative practices contribute to the development of professional learning communities, a promising strategy for the quality of teaching and learning, and the development of skills that undoubtedly lead to changes in pedagogical practices and more adequate solutions to problems and difficulties.

In summary, we find in Cluster X a shallow understanding of the concepts of supervision and collaboration, where the former appears associated with the teacher performance evaluation process, with inconsistent supervisory and collaborative practices, without continuity, and the latter is highly dependent on and centered on the management bodies, despite the recognition of the impact of supervision on the improvement of teaching experiences and professional development.

Regarding teachers' professional development, there seems to be a convergence of ideas and understandings. Leadership considers it fundamental, emphasizing lifelong continuous training. We believe that, in the supervisory process combined with collaboration, two dimensions need to be revitalized: observation and active listening, as teachers need to be challenged and unsettled, but in an enlightened and reflective manner. It is urgent, then, to open windows, change beliefs, and lead teachers to a positive perception of supervision practices, seen as constructive and promoting professional development, resulting from interaction and mutual feedback, teamwork, and joint reflection.

The school needs to be conceived as a space for experimentation, connected to the external world, a school seen and felt as a place of education and development; Education should then be synonymous with movement, fostering experiences centered on action, experiences, and encounters. It is also important to highlight the importance and role of teachers who, although not the sole responsible parties, must encourage change in the school and in themselves as decision-makers in curriculum development. It is essential to refocus the teaching profession for the 21st century, challenging teachers to value their training, seeing it as an unfinished process and in the constant reconstruction of knowledge and professional development. In this sense, we believe it is



necessary to foster reflection among teachers and carry out teamwork because, without the involvement and participation of teaching professionals, reforms in education will not succeed. However, these changes imply a new educational context, new ways of working, permanent interactions with colleagues, changes in the organization and culture of the school, the development of teamwork, and, above all, the teacher who plays a central role, depending on this the quality of the educational phenomenon.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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