

# Full-time Schools in Portugal: Participation and Educational Achievement

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## ABSTRACT

Since its implementation in 2006, Portugal's full-time schools programme led to a massive increase of curricular enrichment and family-support activities in public schools throughout the country. The literature review brings together important contributions from previous research and assessments of the full-time school programme, including results of similar programmes in other countries and particularities of the Portuguese case. The methodological design is outlined, describing the research questions as well as the variables and categories under consideration. Drawing on extensive administrative data from all public schools in the country, the analysis focuses on participation rates and their link to school location, socioeconomic context, local providers, and educational achievements. The (moderately) positive correlation between participation rates and educational success arises as a key finding, for which possible explanatory factors are discussed. The article concludes with some implications for policy-making and future research on this topic.

**Keywords** SCHOOL TIME, SCHOOL COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIP, PRIMARY EDUCATION, ACADEMIC FAILURE, SOCIAL POLICY

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In 2006, the Portuguese government launched a programme to offer all interested families curriculum enrichment activities (*atividades de enriquecimento curricular*, AEC) in primary education (1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> grades), assuring a learning schedule from 9 to 5 pm, every school day, and to promote family-support service (*componente de apoio à família*, CAF) in the early morning, late afternoon and school calendar breaks. This meant a major change regarding the previous organisational model of most public schools in the country, which ensured only 5 hours per day of compulsory curriculum activities, often in a double shift (some groups in the morning and others in the afternoon).

Fifteen years later and considering similar experiences in other countries, the present article seeks to analyse the implementation of this programme and its key impacts on Portuguese education, based on previous studies and nationwide statistical data. Firstly, core



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features of this programme will be outlined, in comparison with practices elsewhere. Secondly, the methodological design will be introduced. And thirdly, the paper will come to an end with the presentation and discussion of its main results.

## 2 CONTEXT

The introduction of English classes in all public primary schools, free and optional for all families (Dispatch 14753/2005) was the first step taken back in 2005 towards the generalisation of “Full-Time Schools” in Portugal. During the following year, the same regime (was) extended to other AECs, privileging sports and arts (especially music) (Dispatch 12591/2006). Meanwhile, the government established that public schools should be open at least from 9 am to 5.30 pm, including AEC, lunch service and break times, and could remain open longer hours, as well as on holidays, with locally organised CAF (Dispatch 16795/2005). Later, the different governments in charge updated such legislation, but its main elements stayed unchanged.

As developed in previous studies, such policy relied on five main features:

1. *An orientation towards family needs* in accordance with a principle of equal opportunities, considering that most parents work on a full-time basis (Neves, 2014; Palhares, 2009; Pires, 2007).
2. *A flexible polycentric framework* enabling curriculum enrichment activities (AEC) and family-support services (CAF) developed by different local promoters (schools, local authorities, parents’ associations or private institutions of social solidarity), and often in partnership with other local organisations, under the supervision of central authorities (Abrantes, 2011; H. Almeida, 2017; Gomes, 2013; Pires, 2017);
3. *A low-cost model* requiring a more intensive use of school buildings and staff, complemented by a national-funded scheme to hire additional workers on an hourly basis according to the number of students involved, and often helped by other local entities (Fonseca & Marques, 2021; Prelhaz, 2017; Schimonek & Adrião, 2018);
4. *An ambiguous curriculum orientation* promoting traditional school-model activities as well as informal, playful and experimental ones, especially focused on curriculum areas hardly developed by regular primary schoolteachers, such as English, arts, sports, etc. (Abrantes, Ferro, Lopes, Veloso, & Swinnerton, 2019; Bayo & Diniz, 2017; Matthews, 2005);
5. *Community ties*, both at a national level, through an AEC Advisory Board composed of central authorities and representatives of municipalities, teachers and parents, and at a local level, establishing annual contracts with local entities (usually in partnership) as a requirement for funding approval (Machado & Cruz, 2014; Paulino, 2020; Samper, 2020).

With regard to the national context, at the time this programme was launched (2005), 90% of students attended public schools and 5.5% were retained according to official data referred

to primary education. School failure and dropout reached very high figures, strongly correlated with students' backgrounds, while the scores in international tests remained considerably below European averages. Most parents worked on a full-time basis, while private educational and care services were only available for a privileged minority (A. N. Almeida & Vieira, 2006), and parenthood networks were also more available to middle and higher classes (Vasconcelos, 2002). Research on children's time use has shown the prevalence of television consumption, in contrast to the low levels of cultural, community-based and sports activities (Lopes & Coelho, 2017; Pereira & Neto, 1999).

The full-time schools programme came into operation in the context of a new cycle of modernisation policies, including investment in school buildings and the closure of many small primary schools in rural areas, along with the implementation of national programmes to improve learning patterns in reading, mathematics and science, a school (clusters) autonomy policy, and a new student and school evaluation system (Fernandes, Neves, Tinoca, Viseu, & Henriques, 2000). AEC national attendance rates exceeded 80% from the first year onwards (see official reports available at [www.dge.mec.pt/acompanhamentoavaliacao](http://www.dge.mec.pt/acompanhamentoavaliacao)). During the last 15 years, the improvement of educational indicators has been progressive and impressive, recently achieving the European averages both in completion rates and international tests. However, specifying the effective contribution made by each programme turns out to be hard since they are strongly intertwined.

Still, the external assessment of AECs nationwide, carried out in 2013 by a research team from the University of Evora (Fialho, 2013), stressed the highly positive impacts of this programme on organisational practices (openness to the community, better coordination and resources management), parents' satisfaction and students' learning patterns. As its main strengths, the same report emphasised service stability, local partnerships, staff qualification, access equity and adjustment to family time needs. Weaknesses included: parents' low involvement, controversies regarding schedules, staff's working conditions, low levels of articulation and supervision, shortage of specific materials (for instance, music instruments or sports equipment), prevalence of traditional pedagogical models, a limited range of activities, and lack of inclusion and assessment procedures.

Unfortunately, this was the only external evaluation undertaken on a national basis; and it did not include CAF. Besides, academic research on this topic, usually based on local case studies, has declined during the last few years (Radinger & Boeskens, 2021; Samper, 2020). Meanwhile, several curriculum and administrative measures taken under the auspices of austerity policies, between 2011 and 2015, extended compulsory instruction time, reducing the schedule available and the state financial support to AEC. More recently, a new decentralisation reform which transferred a new set of competences to municipalities, including AEC, resulted in a long controversy between central and local authorities, especially regarding funding schemes. These recent processes raised some doubts concerning the quality and prospects of full-time school programmes.

During the last decades, many other countries have considered extending school hours to improve students' outcomes, to promote equity and/or to support work-family balance (Alfaro, Evans, & Holland, 2015; Ceballos, 2022; Long, 2014; Radinger & Boeskens,

2021; Schüpbach & Lilla, 2019; Tenti, Meo, & Gunturiz, 2010). Most studies have found some positive effects on academic attainment, particularly in vulnerable socioeconomic contexts. Nonetheless, the impacts on learning achievements are far from impressive, especially in Europe (Long, 2014; Raffo & Dyson, 2007), and other social benefits are often suggested but rarely measured with systematic procedures.

Authors such as Dyson (2011) or Malone (2020) stress that the impact of these programmes depends on their design and forms of implementation, being enhanced when communities become involved and wider social strategies are in place. Roda (2016) alerts about the neoliberal pressures to concentrate these programmes on academic reinforcement activities in poor communities, as opposed to more expensive cultural and diversified projects in privileged ones. Focusing on Mexico, Padilla-Romo (2017; 2022) has developed a sophisticated methodological design that led her to conclude, for instance, that despite being evident, the academic benefits appear gradually rather than during the first year of participation, and particularly among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

### 3 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The analysis provided in this article is based on official data, collected by the DG Statistics for Education and Science (DGEEC) through an annual national survey administered to all public schools in Portugal mainland and centred on curriculum enrichment and family-support services. This survey forms part of the national statistics system and includes a complex set of reliability standards, supervised by the National Statistics Institute. DGEEC publishes an annual report of the main data on its institutional webpage (<https://www.dgeec.mec.pt/np4/99/>).

Data collection takes place by school instead of students, which makes it impossible to carry out an analysis of individual characteristics. However, since enrolment is optional and the participation rate varies widely across schools and across municipalities (see Results section), the possibility exists to examine such variation in terms of contextual variables and to explore its impact on other educational indicators, e.g. primary school failure rates. Such aggregated impacts acquire relevance since a low/high participation rate also serves as an indicator for the quality of activities and their level of appreciation in the local context.

The analysis considered two different school years, 2018/19 and 2020/21, not only to produce more robust results but also to grasp the role played by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the second one, a part of the teaching took place on a distance education basis and many parents were teleworking too, probably affecting participation in non-compulsory activities.

Crossing different official databases, our analysis was guided by the following questions:

- do participation rates vary across different contexts? And if they do, are those rates higher in vulnerable contexts?
- do participation rates vary according to the local promoter? If so, do those rates grow when the local promoter is a community-based organisation?
- Is there a correlation between participation rates and academic outcomes?

Three typologies were considered to study the context: (a) the 5 administrative regions of the country, characterised by different socioeconomic structures and educational patterns; (b) three levels of urbanisation (urban, mixed, rural) based on population density; and (c) three levels of socioeconomic condition (privileged, heterogeneous, vulnerable), according to an index developed and published by the DG Statistics of Education and Science which takes into account data on welfare support, mothers' educational level and public-private distribution for each municipality ([www.infoescolas.mec.pt](http://www.infoescolas.mec.pt)). Since typologies (b) and (c) rely on quantitative variables, they allow for a correlation analysis vis-à-vis other quantitative variables such as participation and retention rates.

Regarding the local promoter, a list of entities by municipality published in the above-mentioned annual reports allowed us to distribute municipalities according to the type of organisation promoting AEC locally: schools; city council; parents' association; and private institutions. A fifth category was added to include municipalities where different types of local promoters are working simultaneously. In the case of CAF, a similar analysis is not possible due to the vaguer regulatory framework and the absence of such an offer in many schools.

Because there is no national exam in primary education in Portugal, one cannot analyse students' performance on a similar test. Even so, the retention rate turns out to be a relevant indicator as it indicates teachers' assessment about whether students failed to acquire the competences of that specific school grade and are not prepared to attend the following one. Schoolteachers are hired by the central administration, acknowledging their autonomy to assess students according to their expertise. Besides, except for the 1<sup>st</sup> grade, retention rates are considerably high in the remaining grades and strongly correlate with students' socioeconomic background (DGEEC, 2021). For instance, in 2019, the national retention rate in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade was 5%, but it exceeded 10% in 38 municipalities out of 277.

## 4 RESULTS

Participation rates have been high in AEC (between 80% and 90%) and relatively low in CAF (around 20%) throughout the last eight years, with a small decrease, during the past year, regarding AEC, probably due to the COVID-19 pandemic (DGEEC, 2021). Nonetheless, a wide variation exists across the 278 municipalities in the mainland. The participation rate at AEC was less than two thirds in 37 municipalities, in 2018/19, going up to 51 in 2020/21, in contrast with full attendance (100%) in 59 and 64 municipalities during the same years. CAF implementation did not take place in 128 municipalities in 2018/19, while participation rates rose above 50% of students in 51 (120 and 56, in 2020/21).

With respect to regional differences (Table 1), participation rates were higher both for AEC and CAF in the North, Centre and Lisbon Metropolitan Area (AML). These three regions stand out as the most populated ones, concentrating 86% of the students. Interestingly, according to the annual monitoring reports issued by the AEC Advisory Board and DGEEC, Algarve had lower attendance rates since the launch of the programme (in 2021, it amounted to only 55% in its rural municipalities), but Alentejo was characterised by high

levels of attendance over the first decade (participation rates at AEC came down from 90% in 2015/16 to 78% in 2018/19).

**Table 1** Rates of participation in AEC and CAF, according to municipality context

		AEC				CAF			
		Participation rate		Stand. Dev.		Participation rate		Stand. Dev.	
		2019	2021	2019	2021	2019	2021	2019	2021
<b>(1) Region</b>	(1.1) North	86.7	83.0	11.47	13.71	21.7	21.6	28.87	30.17
	(1.2) Centre	84.6	84.1	16.41	17.57	22.2	24.3	39.09	37.92
	(1.3) Lisbon MA	88.4	87.2	11.55	10.98	24.4	22.2	17.81	15.72
	(1.4) Alentejo	78.1	77.7	21.20	22.77	25.5	9.3	31.34	31.48
	(1.5) Algarve	74.4	75.2	17.03	19.47	8.1	10.9	7.74	27.91
<b>(2) Density</b>	(2.1) Urban	85.9	84.3	13.40	13.60	22.1	20.8	22.41	21.53
	(2.2) Mixed	80.9	80.4	20.28	19.75	18.0	17.3	30.68	29.69
	(2.3) Rural	91.8	85.7	14.07	19.55	27.9	31.6	40.12	40.27
<b>(3) Socioeconomic background</b>	(3.1) Vulnerable	86.4	82.7	18.82	20.23	17.5	20.5	34.56	37.03
	(3.2) Heterogeneous	85.0	84.0	16.89	18.46	21.2	18.8	30.70	33.14
	(3.3) Privileged	85.4	83.3	12.64	16.50	21.7	26.0	36.05	32.22

Urbanisation does not appear to be a strong predictor of participation rates. The latter are higher both in urban and in rural municipalities for both AEC and CAF, being slightly lower in mixed ones. Even so, standard deviation is high, especially concerning CAF attendance in rural contexts, which evidences very distinct patterns within each category.

The analysis of students' socioeconomic background in each school cluster uncovers a clearer differentiation between contexts: in vulnerable communities, the rate of participation in AEC is higher than the national average, but in CAF is lower. This pattern becomes stronger at the school cluster scale than at the one corresponding to municipality (see Table 2): the correlation between socioeconomic level and participation rate is negative and increased recently, in the case of AEC (-0.068 in 2018/19; -0.124 in 2020/21), as opposed to the positive correlation shown by CAF (0.103 in 2018/19 and 0.089 in 2020/21). Unlike small municipalities, which usually have only one school cluster, bigger municipalities have several clusters and socioeconomic differences between their students are often striking, as a result of residential segregation and other factors.

Regarding AEC local promoters, municipalities where the city council (46% of the cases in 2018/19) or parents' associations (4%) oversee AEC hold a higher participation rate, in comparison with the remaining categories (Table 3). This proves especially relevant since school clusters are in charge of AEC in around 1/3 of the municipalities, reaching 41% in rural contexts.

A negative correlation exists between participation (in both AEC and CAF) and retention rates (see Table 4 and Table 5). Despite not being high, correlation rates are consistent and higher in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades, especially in AEC, which suggests a cumulative effect. An

**Table 2** Participation rates in AEC and CAF, according to the socioeconomic context of the school cluster

	AEC				CAF			
	Participation rate		Stand. Dev.		Participation rate		Stand. Dev.	
	2019	2021	2019	2021	2019	2021	2019	2021
(3.1) Vulnerable	88.6	86.6	15.32	17.62	19.3	18.6	25.31	26.66
(3.2) Heterogeneous	84.6	83.8	17.61	18.00	20.2	20.6	30.49	30.92
(3.3) Privileged	83.7	80.4	16.65	20.17	27.3	23.3	32.30	29.62
CORRELATION LEVEL	-0.068	-0.124			0.103	0.089		

**Table 3** Participation rate in AEC according to the local promoter

Local promoter	Participation rate		Stand. Dev.	
	2019	2020	2019	2020
(1) City town	87.0	84.9	15.21	17.63
(2) School cluster	83.2	80.5	18.43	21.70
(3) Private institution	83.2	80.5	13.36	12.84
(4) Parents' association	88.3	85.2	13.60	10.37
(5) Hybrid	84.5	81.2	15.76	13.14

overall decline of retention rates took place between 2019 and 2021, though the impact of AEC remained stable, while that of CAF has declined.

**Table 4** Retention rates in 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade by municipality, according to the participation rate in AEC

	2019			2020		
	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4
< 50%	5.92	3.23	2.23	3.7	1.2	1.8
50 - 75%	4.92	1.35	1.50	3.3	1.3	1.2
75 - 90%	5.98	1.40	1.39	3.4	1.0	1.1
> 90%	5.02	1.41	1.17	3.3	0.8	0.9
Correlation level	-0.057	-0.149	-0.156	-0,025	-0,105	-0,153

**Table 5** Retention rates in 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade by municipality, according to the participation rate in CAF

	2019			2021		
	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4
0%	6.50	1.83	1.61	3.83	1.12	1.19
0 - 25%	5.07	1.58	1.26	2.99	0.83	1.18
25 - 50%	3.66	1.00	1.25	2.71	1.03	1.03
> 50%	4.06	1.04	0.75	3.25	0.95	0.62
Correlation level	-0,142	-0,119	-0,171	-0,037	0,003	-0,129



This negative correlation between participation in the full-time school programme and retention rates (which means a positive influence on school attainment) is stronger in school clusters with a vulnerable socioeconomic context. This in turn suggests a higher effect of the programme among students from poor backgrounds (see Table 6). In this case, the effect becomes considerable from the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade onwards, whereas the cumulative effect grows in heterogeneous contexts, the effect being residual (or even negative) in privileged milieux. This effect also tends to be stronger also in AEC rather than CAF, and in 2019/20, compared to 2020/21.

**Table 6** Correlations between participation rates in AEC/CAF and retention rates, in 2018/19 and 2020/21, according to the school cluster's socioeconomic context

(3) Socioeconomic background	Correlation	2019			2021		
		Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4
(3.1) Vulnerable	AEC*Retention	-0.247	-0.123	-0.224	-0.068	-0.059	-0.136
	CAF*Retention	-0.209	-0.125	-0.112	-0.064	-0.049	-0.058
(3.2) Heterogeneous	AEC*Retention	-0.022	-0.130	-0.220	0.053	-0.008	0.021
	CAF*Retention	-0.109	-0.078	-0.108	-0.093	-0.042	-0,15
(3.3.) Privileged	AEC*Retention	0.036	0.057	0.071	-0.054	-0.106	0.027
	CAF*Retention	-0.033	-0.103	0.045	0.024	0.087	-0.154

## 5 DISCUSSION

The data analysis presented in the previous section shows that school clusters and municipalities with a higher level of participation in AEC and CAF tend to achieve lower retention rates, or expressed differently, better learning outcomes. The low levels of correlation were expected since learning outcomes rely on several factors. However, they are persistent in both years (2018/19 and 2020/21)—stronger in vulnerable contexts—and increase over the primary schooling path, suggesting a cumulative effect of participation, as pointed out by Padilla-Romo (2017; 2022) in relation to Mexico. Furthermore, this correlation becomes especially relevant in AEC, since we simultaneously observed that AEC participation is higher in vulnerable communities, and therefore the overall academic achievement increase occurs against the odds.

Correlation does not necessarily mean a cause-effect relationship, especially considering that a third factor may affect both variables. In this case, for instance, schools (and municipalities) with better educational projects and resources may generate higher rates of participation in optional activities and lower retention rates at the same time. If this happens, our results raise wider concerns regarding equal opportunities in Portuguese education. Unfortunately, the administrative datasets under examination do not enable us to test this hypothesis. Notwithstanding, one must bear in mind the existence of a clear distinction in the Portuguese educational system between, on the one hand, curriculum learning activities and assessment, ruled by schools and teachers hired by the national administration, and, on the other hand, optional activities (AEC and CAF), mainly developed by local entities with their own staff. Such divide mitigates a possible common effect of a “third factor”;



which in turn suggests that the full-time school programme has a positive effect on learning outcomes.

This (moderately) positive effect of the full-time school programme on students' performance should not come as a surprise, considering similar conclusions drawn from previous studies conducted both in Portugal (Fialho *et al.*, 2013) and in other countries (Berthelon, Kruger, & Vienne, 2016; Ceballos, 2022; Padilla-Romo, 2017; Radinger & Boeskens, 2021). However, the existing literature was far from conclusive, since other works, especially European ones, failed to identify a positive impact derived from extending school day programmes (James-Burdumy, Dynarski, & Deke, 2007; Long, 2014; Raffo & Dyson, 2007; Schüpbach & Lilla, 2019). Moreover, in the Portuguese case, the political changes and the financial cuts introduced during austerity times (from 2011 to 2015) contributed to a decreasing interest of many municipalities in this programme and raised concerns regarding its pedagogical value (Fonseca & Marques, 2021; Schimonek & Adrião, 2018).

This effect appears to be higher in 2018/2019 than in 2020/21, especially in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, a part of the 2020/21 academic year (between January and March) had to be carried out through distance education. AEC and CAF struggled to adjust to this regime, and absenteeism probably increased to a large extent, although no data are available. The persistent effect in 4<sup>th</sup> grade may result from the cumulative participation in the preceding years.

Since educational administration in Portugal traditionally operates on a centralised basis and regions do not enjoy political autonomy, research has hardly focused on territorial differences. However, the regional management of European funds alongside the decentralisation policies make such approach more relevant. When it comes to the “full-time school” programme, some particularities become clearly visible above all in Southern regions. In Algarve, lower rates of participation appear in inner land rural municipalities, although they are also lower than average in urban coastal ones. Algarve holds some cultural and socioeconomic specificities, including a large part of population in mobility (not having Portuguese as their first language) and devoted to tourism, a sector with diversified work schedules (rarely from 9 to 5). Further research needs to be undertaken to confirm that hypothesis, although attraction for a full-time school model might probably be lower in such context. In Alentejo, participation rates remained higher during the first decade of the programme, their decrease appearing to have political reasons. The Portuguese Communist Party, governing many municipalities in Alentejo, highly criticised the austerity policies and the recent decentralisation movement, arguing that more funds should be transferred from central to local administrations in order to provide these activities. Out of 14 Alentejo municipalities run by the PCP from 2017 to 2021, AEC were organised by the school cluster in 10 of them (and in another 2, by a private entity), and, since CAF implementation is not mandatory, 8 of these municipalities lacked this service.

The higher AEC participation rates in vulnerable socioeconomic contexts are consonant with the evidence that low-income families can hardly afford the access to education and childcare services outside schools (Neves, 2014; Radinger & Boeskens, 2021; Vasconcelos, 2002). Nevertheless, the opposite lower levels of CAF participation in these contexts deserve

further research, particularly because students' attendance receives full support by the state for low-income families, requiring a monthly fee for the other families instead. Since this offer is not mandatory, actually depending on the local providers' decision, a part of the explanation may lie on a smaller availability to implement those kinds of services in poorer communities. By way of example, in 2020/21, this offer was absent in 48% of the schools located in vulnerable environments, as opposed to 41% in privileged ones.

Considering the efforts made in other countries to extend school days in urban communities (Berthelon et al., 2016; Holme et al., 2020; Raffo & Dyson, 2007), as well as the evidence that work-life balance poses a greater challenge in Portuguese urban regions (Perista et al., 2016), a surprising result is the high adhesion of rural communities to the full-time school programme, especially in the North and Centre regions, while it is lower in mixed contexts. These data suggest that participation is boosted by parents' work needs in urban environments, other factors needing to be explored in rural areas. The centrality of schools in these communities, the lack of alternative activities for children and the home-school transport schedules are possible explanations (in 41 out of 105, participation rates in AEC reached 100%) (Abrantes, 2011). Particularly regarding CAF, a contrasting model becomes apparent in the 105 rural municipalities: service provision was absent in 55 of them, while the level of participation exceeded 75% in 25 in 2020/21.

Finally, participation rates in AEC are slightly higher in municipalities where the city council or parents' associations run this programme. One may argue that such pattern confirms the perspective that a stronger community role in activities management is positive, in comparison with other models more centred on schools or on the provision by private institutions (Dyson, 2011; Holme et al., 2020; Malone, 2020; Warren & Mapp, 2011). On a national scope, such higher performance of city councils and parents' associations also encourages the ongoing decentralisation process. However, since differences are not too substantial, conclusions must be cautious.

## 6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Extending the school day may produce several different effects that strongly depend on how such policy is developed. For instance, the national index of well-being recorded a very significant increase of work-life balance precisely during the years of implementation of this programme (2004 to 2007) and stability since then (Ine - Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2004). In contrast, the slight growth in the proportion of pupils attending private schools was not affected by the programme (9.4% in 1999/2000; 11.5% in 2009/10; 13.3% in 2019/20) and unions claimed that it contributed to an overload of teachers' work, which in turn resulted in higher levels of absenteeism and a lack of young people wanting to become teachers. It seems difficult to establish scientifically a link between the programme and these wider dynamics, though, insofar as they depend on a wide variety of factors.

Therefore, our study focused on the official data of the educational system, exploring the relationships between local contexts, levels of participation in the programme and students' academic outcomes. Despite being only one side of the question, it is a relevant one. Accord-

ing to these data, a lower rate of retention rate appeared in municipalities with higher levels of participation in AEC and CAF, showing higher correlation levels in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades that suggest a cumulative effect throughout primary education. Such correlation acquires special significance in AEC, since our analysis has revealed that participation is simultaneously higher in poorer communities.

This result does not refute neither the criticism over the schooling model and the low pedagogical quality identified in many of these activities nor the risks of children's oversaturation and lack of time to play and create. However, since most students have no opportunities for afterschool educational, cultural or community-based activities, participating in full-time school programmes appears to be beneficial, at least to reach the minimum required standards at school to avoid retention. The lack of data regarding different achievement levels in primary education does not allow, for instance, to explore whether the participation in these programmes also contributes to a higher performance among those who reach the minimum standards. However, since the retention rate still acquires prominence in Portuguese primary schools and acts as a strong predictor of school success in the subsequent educational path, the impact derived from taking part in this programme must not be neglected, especially in the context of equity policies.

Our analysis therefore suggests that the programme of full-time schools has a (moderately) positive influence on students' outcomes, even though participation levels vary widely across municipalities and no strategy is available yet to analyse and foster patterns in contexts with lower attendance and higher retention rates. This happens above all in CAF, a service that has never been subject to a national evaluation. Likewise, our analysis provides attests a lack of activities in many municipalities, more likely to occur in vulnerable contexts and posing a relevant challenge for equity policies. In the current moment of the decentralisation process, there is a threat that such responsibility may not be assumed either by the central administration or by many municipalities, due to tensions between them that revolve around funding schemes. In addition, since lower participation rates were observed in municipalities where AEC are overseen by school clusters and private entities, it becomes important to develop a strategy to involve city councils and parents' associations in these territories and/or to create suitable conditions for a higher performance of schools and private entities when implementing these activities.

Finally, many issues raised by this research should be approached in future research. The correlation between participation rates and students' academic scores in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade as well as their performance in national tests (*provas de aferição*), now carried out in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades (after some years of suspension, due to COVID-19), may prove useful to deepen this analysis. Case studies in territories with high and low participation rates will likewise probably improve our knowledge about the reasons for variation in participation rates, as well as its relationship with learning outcomes. Other social municipality-based indicators will also help to understand both participation rates and the wider impacts of this programme.

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