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Socio-ecologies and teachers' professionalism: on the careers of Portuguese teachers over the last five decades

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the construction and development of teacher professionalism in Portugal over the last five decades, drawing on a biographical-narrative study of 96 veteran teachers recognised by their peers as committed. Adopting a socio-ecological perspective, it analyses professionalism across micro, meso and macro levels and in relation to teachers' life cycles. A mixed analytical strategy was used: deductive analysis based on Evans's multidimensional model of professionalism, and inductive analysis to identify factors influencing its development over time. Findings reveal the emergence of a form of 'positive professionalism', particularly evident during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, characterised by strong commitment to students and social justice, collaborative and pedagogically transformative practices, professional agency and sustained engagement with educational knowledge. From the early 2000s onwards, teachers' narratives point to a contrasting 'negative professionalism', associated with managerial governance, intensified bureaucratisation, reduced autonomy and growing demotivation. The study underscores the importance of alignment between teachers' professional projects and educational policies, the relational and prospective nature of agency and the role of socio-educational ecologies across career stages. By foregrounding teachers' lived experiences over time, it contributes to international debates on transformative professionalism and informs research and policy on teacher wellbeing and sustainable professional development.

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Introduction

In the Green Paper on Teacher Education in Europe: High Quality Teacher Education for High Quality Education and Training (Bucherberger et al., 2000), a model of the professional teacher was proposed as an alternative to bureaucratic/conformist and/or technical models of the teaching profession. According to classical theories of professionalism (Abbott, 1988), professionals share a specific ethic and a specialised body of

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knowledge and enjoy sufficient autonomy to make decisions about the profession and professional practice, with the aim of benefiting children, young people, families, regions and society. Several publications from the same period also referred to this professional model, respecting the specificities of the teaching profession and drawing on developments in professionalism theories (e.g. Ramalho et al., 2004). This was not a defence of an elitist position regarding the teaching profession but rather an affirmation of the autonomy of the profession and the dignity of teaching professionals, while simultaneously valuing the praxeological specificity of their professional knowledge (Tardif, 2002). What is at stake is the rejection of a view of teaching as an activity controlled by actors other than teachers themselves, and the defence of a profession with autonomy to make decisions about itself, in dialogue with its various stakeholders.

Reviewing discourses on professionalism, particularly in Anglophone countries, Mockler (2005) identifies the emergence of an ‘instrumental professionalism’ that claims the professional nature of teaching, but does so through the valorisation of evidence-based knowledge (represented by David Hargreaves) and of *what works*, which is inconsistent with the specificities of teachers’ professional knowledge (Tardif, 2002). For Mockler (2005, p. 737), this ‘instrumental professionalism’ increases the control from the State and others ‘from outside the profession’.

Sachs (2000, 2003) and Evetts (2003, 2011) denounce the ‘new public management’ that seeks to impose on education professionals, and on those in other public services, a form of managerialist professionalism, which Sachs (2000), drawing on Rees (1995) and Pollitt (1990), defines as follows:

managerialism is an ideology with two distinct claims: that efficient management can solve any problem; and that practices which are appropriate for the conduct of private sector enterprises can also be applied to the public sector. (Sachs, 2000, p. 79)

It is within this context that Mockler develops the idea that a ‘transformative’ professionalism has been emerging, which the author equates with Judith Sachs’s activist professionalism (Sachs, 2003): ‘a kind of professionalism which [provides] for transformation, activism or the exercise of civic responsibility’ (Mockler, 2005, p. 733).

A review of the literature published between 2012 and 2022 shows that research on professionalism during this period, rather than continuing to elucidate the nature of transformative professionalism, focused on a ‘critical analysis of the impact of neoliberal policies on ways of being professional and on school cultures’ (Lopes et al., 2024, p. 834). Chiang and Trezise (2021, p. 115) refer to teacher professionalism inspired by neoliberalism as ‘neo-professionalism’ and argue that it conflates the being of governance and the being of teachers, leading to demotivation and burnout.

It can be seen that, during the same period, there has been a significant increase in publications on teacher agency (Lopes et al., 2024). Torrance and Forde (2017) argue that teachers’ re-professionalisation in opposition to neo-professionalism will strengthen teachers’ individual and collective agency, which is connected to other concepts such as individual and collective engagement, efficacy and emotional resilience. As Biesta et al. (2015, pp. 624–625) state, ‘The [re]turn to teacher agency not only gives explicit permission to teachers to exert high[er] degrees of professional agency within the contexts in which they work, but actually sees agency as an important dimension of teachers’ professionalism.’

Cong-Lem (2021, p. 726) identifies three types of factors influencing the enactment of teacher agency: personal, social/relational and contextual factors. In Lopes et al. (2024, pp. 842–843), a relationship was established between each of these types of factors, the level of activity relevant to each—namely research, leadership, and governance—and corresponding types of professionalism: mature (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009), democratic (Sachs, 2016), and activist (Sachs, 2003, 2016):

Research allowing teachers' special knowledge about the practice, but also the empowerment of teachers' ability to identify problems and interpret situations, informs "mature" professionalism, which takes courage and "requires a recognition of the complexity of school education and then a desire for improvement and action" (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009, p. 40). At the school level, the ability of professionals to act collectively, focusing on collegial relationships, collaborative working practices, and communication skills, is a central aspect, related to Sachs' (Sachs, 2003, 2016) conception of 'democratic professionalism'. Finally, the societal level is especially related to 'activist professionalism' (Sachs, 2003). Lopes et al. (2024, 842–843)

This perspective has the advantage of situating the development of transformative professionalism within socio-educational ecologies (at micro, meso and macro levels, the latter of which, within the scope of this article, integrates cultural models and the political framework), making it possible to identify what, at different levels and through their interaction (Ehrenfeld, 2022), promotes or hinders it. Moreover, it enables the establishment of a link between studies on professionalism and the socio-ecological perspective on teachers' professional identity (Lopes, 2009), oriented towards 'real social change' and seeking to capture the situated and socio-historical nature of teachers' professional modes of being. In line with Dubar's (1995) view of identity as a dual transaction—biographical (from the self to the self) and relational (from the self to others, and from others to the self)—it has been argued (Lopes, 2009) that the relational transaction engages all levels of the socio-ecological system: micro, meso, exo and macro. These levels interact with one another and with individuals, either compensating for, amplifying or constraining effects.

This ecological perspective on professionalism not only makes its development dependent on the different levels of the social ecology (micro, meso and macro), but also highlights the connection between professionalism and the forms through which it develops. In the literature, a relationship is generally established between professionalism and the conditions that promote it. Boylan et al. (2023, p. 652) discuss the relationship between 'critical professionalism' (which encompasses transformative, democratic and activist professionalism) and professional learning and development. Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009), Mockler (2013), and Baker-Doyle (2017), among others, relate transformative professional learning, drawing on Mezirow (1991) and Freire (1970), and associated with experience and identity work, to transformative professionalism. In these approaches, a professional ideal is defined (guiding professionalisation), and the factors that may strengthen or weaken such professionalism are identified.

Linda Evans (2014) links professionalism and professional development, attributing to both the same three-dimensional structure, but rejects the use of qualifying adjectives or the addition of a value orientation to either. Stating that 'professionalism is principally about people's modes of being (as) practitioners', she adds that 'in representing what I conceive as professionalism's ontological composition, the model demonstrates its

(professionalism's) quiddity through its componential structure' (Evens, p. 189): behavioural, attitudinal, and intellectual dimensions and their respective components.

Although several studies on the quality of learning in different countries emphasise the importance of the ecological system as a whole for educational quality (Darling-Hammond, 2017), studies on teacher professionalism and the conditions for its development usually, as Ehrenfeld (2022) and Boylan et al. (2017) argue, fail to take into account the socio-ecologies that promote or hinder it, including temporalities—namely historical periods and teachers' life cycles. In Portugal, for example, the extension of the retirement age, as in several other countries, invites important reflection on a new phase in teachers' lives beyond entry, stabilisation, diversification and disengagement (Huberman, 1992; Sánchez-Suricalday et al., 2025; Thomas Dotta & Lopes, 2021).

The general aim of this article is to contribute to the study of the constitution of teacher professionalism and the factors influencing its development, considering—following Boylan et al. (2017), Goodson and Ümarik (2019), and Ehrenfeld (2022) - a specific situation (a country, its historical periods and its cultural context), its ecologies (micro, meso, and macro) and the phases of teachers' life cycles.

The article emerges from a broader research project which sought, among other objectives, to trace the construction of teacher professionalism in Portugal, oriented towards educational transformation,¹ over the 50 years of democratic consolidation (1974–2024). This was a period of profound change in teachers' lives; for this reason, this period and these teachers are considered a 'case' that may provide insights into the characteristics of professionalism and the conditions of its development. The study is guided by the following questions: i) What characteristics define the professionalism of the teachers who carried out the educational transformation of the Portuguese education system over the last 50 years?, ii) Can it be considered a form of transformative professionalism?, iii) What factors impacted the development of this professionalism?, and iv) What role do socio-ecologies and teachers' life cycles play in this development?

These questions were translated into the following specific objectives:

- to characterise the professionalism of veteran Portuguese teachers (status and trajectory) whose careers began between 1973 and 1983 and who are recognised by colleagues and the community as 'committed' teachers, assuming that the likelihood of these teachers contributing to the achievement of the study's objectives was high;
- to analyse the transformative nature of this professionalism;
- to contribute to the identification of factors that promote or hinder the development of this type of professionalism;
- to contribute to clarifying how socio-ecologies and teachers' life cycles impact professionalism.

The methodology adopted needed to be consistent with the objectives and the theoretical framework. Accordingly, a biographical—narrative research strategy was used (Amado, 2014; Bolívar, 2012; Creswell, 2013). Life histories were conducted with approximately one hundred veteran Portuguese teachers who were (re)cognised as 'committed'² by their colleagues throughout their professional trajectories; who began their careers between 1973 and 1983; and who developed their professional lives over the last 40 to 50 years—a

period corresponding to the establishment and development of the democratic regime in Portuguese society. We were interested in the teachers' own perspectives, considering that 'knowledge of [the social world] can only be understood through our own experiences of it and so it is always subjective' (Stapley et al., 2022, p. 2).

The sections that follow briefly describe the spatio-temporal context of the study and present the methodology in greater depth, including ethical considerations. The results are then presented and discussed, followed by the conclusions.

Contextualisation: Portugal 1974–2022

In this section, we seek to provide a concise characterisation of the context to which this study refers, first at a general level, drawing on Reis (1994a, 1994b), and then focusing on schooling and education, based on Stoer (1986), Teodoro (1999), and Lopes and Thomas Dotta (2023).

From 1926 to 1974, Portugal lived under a dictatorship. Following the establishment of the Republic in 1910, several advances in education occurred, but they were accompanied by intense social upheaval. After the 1926 coup d'état, the dictatorial regime controlled the country through repression and ignorance. Education and teachers were profoundly devalued. Not only were very few children and young people able to access education, but teacher education was either minimal (some training institutions were closed) or subject to strict control. This control was also enforced through low salaries.

On 25 April 1974, a coup d'état carried out by the 'movement of the captains' sought to establish a democratic regime and to end the colonial war (which had begun in 1961). The dictatorial regime was already severely weakened and, on the very day of the coup, the population took the streets. Following the departure of the country's leadership, a period of approximately one year, known as the PREC, characterised by strong popular participation across various spheres, particularly in education. This period was marked by the development of early childhood education, which had previously been virtually non-existent for the working classes, and by significant mobilisation of teachers and students in secondary education (Stoer, 1985).

Following the first free elections in 1975, a period of normalisation began, marked by democratic consolidation and the approval of the 1976 Constitution. Portugal's integration into the European Economic Community in 1986 coincided with the approval of the Basic Law of the Education System, which has undergone several amendments, notably regarding the qualification requirements for teachers: since the 1990s, a Bachelor's degree, and since 2008, a Master's degree, for all levels of education.

Education is one of the areas in which particularly strong development has been recognised in Portugal over the 50 years of democracy (Grosso, 2025). The growing demand for education among the population, which had already begun in the 1960s, combined with the openness brought about by the end of the dictatorial regime in 1974, led to a significant increase in student numbers. This expansion required recruiting teachers without specific training and operating schools in buildings that lacked adequate conditions (Lopes, 2006).

During the 1980s, all teachers without specific training were required to undertake pedagogical training and a professional induction period. In the same period, early childhood education was established, and initial teacher education was expanded to

several cities and localities, notably through the creation of Higher Education Schools of Education.

Throughout the 1990s, there was strong investment in both educational research, then in a period of consolidation, and in educational policies aimed at transforming schools into cultural, collective and high-quality spaces. The system of in-service teacher education was created, and departments of education and research units were established in higher education institutions.

From the 2000s onwards, the economic crisis, combined with the introduction of new public management principles, led to profound changes in school contexts and the governance of the education system. Governments promoted changes in school organisation, in the teaching career statute (including performance evaluation), and in the extension of the retirement age, while governmental and media discourses increasingly devalued the teaching profession.

Methodology

This paper stems from a funded research project (information removed due to anonymity) focused on teacher professionalism and innovation (transformation) in Portugal over the last 50 years. Life stories were collected from 96 Portuguese teachers known among their colleagues as committed. This ‘committed teacher’ was defined as a teacher recognised by colleagues as such and who has spent the majority of their career in classroom practice, although they may have had short interruptions of a few years in leadership or supervisory roles in higher education institutions.

The identification of interviewees followed a snowball sampling strategy (Naderifar et al., 2017). The initial identification was carried out by members of the research team (convenience sampling, initiating the snowball process). The team comprised 16 members from 10 higher education institutions across different regions of Portugal (North, Centre and South; coastal and inland). From this initial group, each interviewed teacher suggested further participants. Data collection was continuously monitored by the team to avoid imbalances in regional representation, gender (based on population proportions), and levels of education.

Of the 96 participants, 18% are pre-school teachers (PS), 30% teach in primary education (Years 1–4; 1C), 20% teach in the second cycle of basic education (Years 5–6; 2C), and 32% teach in the third cycle and secondary education (Years 7–12; 3CS). Regarding gender, 81% are women and 19% are men; 46% are still teaching and 54% have retired. They were from different subject areas and, at the time of the study, they lived and/or worked in different Portuguese regions. Subject teachers (2C and 3CS) taught a wide range of disciplines, from the humanities to the sciences, including the arts, expressive subjects and physical education. All participants held a Bachelor’s degree; many held a Master’s degree, and some had completed a doctorate.

The 16 members of the research team were organised into three sub-teams according to the project’s dimensions. The sub-team responsible for the study of teacher professionalism through life stories consisted of eight researchers (two full-time).

The life stories were collected through semi-structured interviews, focused on participants’ professional trajectories. The interview guide was organised around three main pillars: the sharing of a meaningful object from their professional life (including

photographs or books); their entry into the teaching profession; and the stages of their professional journey, including contexts, influencing variables and perspectives on teaching. The interviews took place in a single session (Bolívar, 2006, 2012) and lasted, on average, two hours. Participants were free to choose between face-to-face and online interviews (Lopes & Thomas Dotta, 2023).

Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were produced either manually (by the full-time researchers) or using Amberscript software. In the latter case, the transcriptions were carefully reviewed by all members of the sub-team. The interviews were then imported into NVivo 12, a qualitative analysis software.

Ethics

All participants were informed in advance about the research aims and provided with detailed information regarding the duration and format of the interviews, and voluntary nature of their participation. Particular attention was paid to ethical issues related to anonymity, confidentiality and the use of interview data. Written informed consent was acquired from all participants before the interviews started. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and to decline to answer any questions they found uncomfortable.

To protect participants' identities, all identifying information was removed from the transcripts and pseudonyms were used in all records and publications. Interviews were conducted at times and locations chosen by the participants, including online, and no information that could reasonably identify schools or individuals has been disclosed. Data were stored securely, and access was restricted to the research team. Audio recordings and transcripts were handled in accordance with data protection regulations and will be retained only for the period required for research purposes.

Data analysis

A paradigmatic (Polkinghorne, 1995) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted using both deductive and inductive approaches.

The deductive analysis was based on the components and subcomponents of Evans's model, with the aim of describing the ideal type of professionalism revealed by these teachers. Each component of Evans's model was used as a category, and the subcomponents as subcategories. Based on Evans's (2014) definitions of the model's dimensions and components, the research team clarified the definitions to be used in accordance with the specificity of the corpus under analysis, namely the teaching profession. Table 1 presents the definitions of each component (Evans, 2014, pp. 189–190) and representative statements.

The inductive analysis was conducted to capture factors emerging from the interviews that had an impact on the development of teachers' professionalism. It aimed to identify themes and subthemes arising from teachers' narratives. Initially, the interviews were distributed among the eight members of the sub-team to enable familiarisation with the data and the generation of initial codes. This was followed by the theme identification phase, which involved blind cross-review among team members until the final identification of themes and subthemes. This phase lasted several weeks, during which the sub-

Table 1. Definitions and illustrative statements of deductive dimensions and components.

DEDUCTIVE DIMENSIONS AND COMPONENTS (theoretical quotes from Evans, 2014, pp. 189–190)	
BEHAVIOURAL COMPONENT "relates to what practitioners physically do at work"	Processual dimension <i>"Processes that people apply to their work"</i> I always planned together with students. "Let's agree on what we are going to study this term or this trimester", whatever the case might be. "Let's agree on it" (Iva, ECS)
	Procedural dimension <i>"Procedures that they apply to their work" (procedures are formally prescribed and refer to sequences of action and pre-established norms)</i> Because sometimes it is the teachers who carry out certain administrative tasks, and it is also the teachers who handle enrolments, who do a whole range of things [...] and sometimes we stop doing other things more closely related to pedagogical issues, because the administrative ones have to be done. (Irene, 1C)
	Productive dimension <i>"Output, productivity and achievement (how much people 'do' and what they achieve)"</i> In 1998–99, at the beginning of the 1990s. [We produced] textbooks, all textbooks, always from the perspective of not making them boring. (Célia, 3CS)
	Competential dimension <i>"Skills and competences people have"</i> The meetings were concise, because that's how I am—I tend to be quite concise (Aurora, 3CS)
	Perceptual dimension <i>"Perceptions, beliefs and views held, including those relating to oneself, hence self-perception and identity"</i> The level of behaviour deteriorated; they were more humble before. There were also those little problems that sometimes happened in the playground, but they were solved on the same day. [...] Today it's not like that. Today parents get involved in everything and want to have a say as well. (Gaspar, 1C)
ATTITUDINAL COMPONENT "relates to attitudes held"	Evaluative dimension <i>"People's values"</i> Teaching is an extremely human activity; it is very special. It is unique. We have this tremendously powerful weapon. We carry this weapon with us, as Nelson Mandela used to say, to change the world, to change something. We have that obligation. We have that mission. It is a mission! (Isadora, 3CS)
	Motivational dimension <i>"People's motivation, job satisfaction and morale"</i> I say it again: my greatest inspiration and my greatest motivation are always the students. (Fernanda. 2C)
INTELLECTUAL COMPONENT "relates to practitioners' knowledge and understanding and their knowledge structures"	Epistemological dimension <i>"the bases of people's knowledge"</i> Young children need us physically not to carry them in our arms, but if we remember what Piaget says: "a lot begins with imitation" [...] we have to do things for them to copy, right? Vygotsky says this in a different way, but I understand it in the same sense. (Hortênsia, PS)

team met regularly. After final identification and definition of themes and subthemes, the statements were classified.

The inductive analysis resulted in five categories: Trajectories, Architectures of Practice, Periods of Practice, Perceptions and Feelings, with Factors of Change emerging

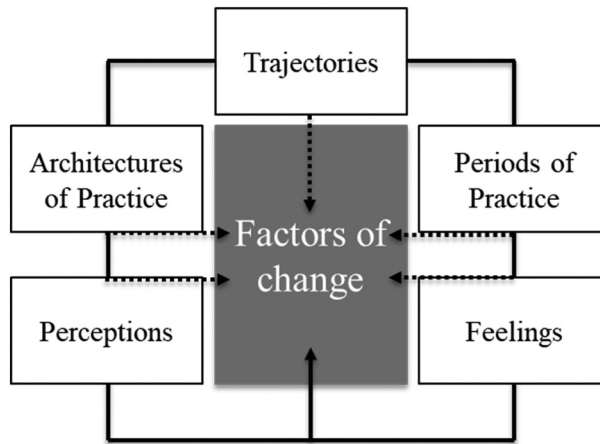


Figure 1. The meta-category “factors of change” at the intersection of categories.

as a meta-category resulting from the intersection of all the others (Figure 1). This meta-category will be the focus of the results presentation.

The interviews were then redistributed among all members of the sub-team (on a random basis) for classification according to the thematic systems of both the deductive and inductive analyses.

Findings from the deductive analysis: an ideal type of Portuguese veteran teachers’ professionalism

Through the deductive analysis, and drawing on Evans’s (2014) model, we sought to identify an ideal type of professionalism. In an ideal type ‘characteristic aspects of the real-world phenomena being studied are incorporated into the model and other non-essential aspects are deliberately excluded. [...] an ideal type does not represent reality itself but rather can serve as an analytical construct or standard against which social researchers can compare specific real-world phenomena under investigation’ (Lynch et al., 2025, p. 3).

Data analysis shows a strong articulation between the Attitudinal and Behavioural dimensions, both of which display positive and negative meanings. Positive statements in these dimensions are mainly associated with the earlier stages of teachers’ careers (the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s), whereas negative statements are predominantly linked to the last two decades. In contrast, all statements across the subcomponents of the Intellectual dimension display a consistently positive meaning.

Within the Behavioural dimension positive meanings occur most frequently in the Processes, Products, and Competences subcomponents. Negative meanings are concentrated primarily in the Procedures subcomponent, while Perceptions and Motivations show a relatively balanced distribution of positive and negative statements.

Positive meanings

The positive meanings focus on students, colleagues, project-based work and participation in professional and pedagogical associations.

This is undoubtedly the best part of the profession. Supporting students is our contribution to their growth and to their preparation for entering working life, so that they can contribute to a society better than ours, or at least a more humanistic one. (Joana, 3CS)

Then there are the good things: the children are wonderful. We are teachers. Many times, we are parents. How often they call me “dad”. We are psychologists. Some children are absolute treasures. We truly carry them in our hearts. (Gaspar, 1C)

I moved to [school] C. P., where I was also extremely happy. It was very interesting. It was at the time when educational projects were beginning, and so we developed the first educational project in that school. It was magnificent. (Iva, 3CS)

At the core of these teachers’ sense of well-being and fulfilment seems to be the improvement of students’ learning, achieved through innovative teaching practices and driven by their passion for the subjects and disciplines they teach.

Teaching classes where you feel that you have achieved some success with students, that they are learning and at the same time are happy, or that a student has achieved something that was difficult for them. (Carmo, 2C)

Even today, I feel great joy, great, great pleasure, when I see children learning and developing [...] it is wonderful to realise that one is capable of helping others learn. (Irene, 1C)

I think I am a competent teacher, very passionate about the profession. [...] And also very passionate about what I had to teach. (Camila, 3CS)

They feel supported by colleagues, whom they value highly and with whom they engage in collaborative work.

I had a working group with teachers whose experience was very different from mine [...] I learned a great deal from them. [...] In fact, we adapted the planning, the topics to be covered, everything according to their [students’] interests. (Iva, 3CS)

They also refer positively to innovative projects proposed from outside the school (by universities or with governmental support, especially during the 1990s), to which they adhered and through which they felt they learned to become better teachers. In addition, they joined educational movements and subject-based teacher associations (Physical Education, Geology, Mathematics, English, among others), where they continued to learn and felt part of a shared professional journey.

Modern School Movement [...] was symbolic for me in terms of becoming more aware of and conceptualising many of the things that I had often defended and done, but which, conceptually, I needed to have theoretical support for. (Luísa, PS)

Then there were national projects I was very involved in, including PEPT, the School for All Project. Our school joined in straight away and it was very important for the school. (Gloria, 2C)

Within the Behavioural dimension, particular emphasis is placed on competences related to organising the pedagogical relationship and identifying and implementing

strategies that reflect the values teachers aim to promote with their students. These teachers perceive themselves as genuinely competent. They highlight their initiative and proactivity, their interpersonal and communication skills with both students and colleagues, and their ability to seek out and learn from professional development opportunities.

I quickly managed to win them over, and they realised it. They felt exactly that empathy that was created between us. (Virgílio 3CS)

And so, my enjoyment of teaching increased more and more as I felt a strong empathy with the students and they with me. It was excellent! (Hélder, 3CS)

When people ask me what method I use to teach reading and writing, I say: “I don’t have just one method! [...] Some children learn very well with the global method. With others, you need the 28-word method. With others, Paulo Freire’s method”. (Marlene, 1C)

In terms of processes, a strong capacity for innovation is evident, with references to new teaching and learning strategies that were successfully developed and implemented.

We also have ‘godparents’ and ‘godchildren’ in our school. The fourth year is responsible for the first year. They feel important. [...] And we also make use of that part (laughs). (Carmina, 1C)

And this is the struggle I keep up so that children do not give up. Sometimes you make a slightly easier test to try to hold on to them, then you encourage them and manage to win some of them over to mathematics. (Constança, 2C)

I developed a project that still exists at the school today: the publication of original stories written by all the students in the school cluster [...] Every year, all the students [...] in assembly [...] discuss their problems, make proposals, and present suggestions for improvement. (Fernanda, 2C)

Within the Intellectual dimension, teachers’ narratives show exclusively positive meanings. In the Epistemological component, teachers refer to teaching methodologies and to their scientific and pedagogical choices, including specific teaching methods and influential authors and schools of thought (such as constructivism, French didactics, Russian structuralism, and figures such as Vygotsky, Piaget, Freire, Edgar Morin, Nunziati, and Perrenoud). They also refer to their involvement in pedagogical and professional associations, which support their engagement in theoretical reflection and collaboration with families and communities.

But before that—and this is what I wanted to mention—at the Mathematics Teachers’ Association (...) I also worked with teachers from all levels of education, always in mathematics. And I attended regional meetings where teachers from all levels of education attended. (Roberta, 1C)

In the Rationalistic subcomponent, teachers present clear reasons and arguments for their pedagogical choices: applying action-research cycles to improve teaching; closely observing students to understand what motivates them and acting accordingly; and being simultaneously approachable and demanding in ways that promote inclusion.

If I plan a lesson, of course I need to have a direction, but the most important thing for me is to finish it by understanding what they have learned. I'm not interested in fulfilling a lesson plan; I'm interested in understanding what they have learned. (Cecília, 2C)

In the Analytical subcomponent, references are made to institutional reflection involving both whole-school processes and individual and collective reflection, leading to the development of new practices—for example, more inclusive approaches to student assessment.

I really enjoyed preparing classes with my colleagues [...] because giving information is simple—we all know how to read and write. But discussing and debating what we are going to do, I think that is very important. (Virgílio, 3CS)

Negative meanings

The negative meanings focus on educational policies that altered the nature of teaching since the beginning of the new millennium, on social changes (such as social isolation and increased competition), on changing roles and expectations of parents and communities, and on teachers' own demotivation.

There was a somewhat turbulent period regarding the profession and the career around 2008. Teachers were not treated very well, and this had an impact on teacher demotivation and even on the way parents began to look at teachers, students began to look at teachers, and society began to look at teachers. (Cecília, 2C)

These meanings are most strongly concentrated in the Procedures subcomponent—rules and scripts that prescribe required behaviours and actions, often imposed without professional justification. Teachers report feeling reduced to mere implementers, overwhelmed by the volume of professionally meaningless work that became routine: 'It started to become a life full of bureaucracy and meetings and paperwork and all sorts of things (...) without being respected, so to speak, much of the time.' (Fátima, 2C)

Such changes—including individual and school-level performance evaluation, policies that impose external definitions of what it means to be a 'good' teacher, a disparaging discourse about the teaching profession, excessive bureaucratic demands, and physical exhaustion—have led, within the Attitudinal dimension, to widespread demotivation and negative perceptions of both colleagues and parents.

We had big fights, big discussions. [...] It was clear and it happened, the relationship between the teachers took a cut, a very big, very big setback. It was very difficult to continue. (Joana, 3CS)

Findings from the inductive analysis: factors influencing teachers' professionalism

Considering the objectives of the study, the qualitative description of this analysis focuses on the meta-category *factors of change*, including key people, key events, constraints and

opportunities, both negative and positive. The results were also organised across three different ecological levels: micro, meso, and macro.

At the micro level, the central focus is the relationship with students, consistently associated with positive meanings and identified as the source of all professional development and transformation. To enhance their pedagogical capacity—centred on the academic and personal success of all students—teachers engage in innovative pedagogical experiences, either proposed to them or designed and implemented by themselves. They generally identify reference teachers in their own trajectories, and relationships with colleagues are regarded as important factors of change.

All these aspects are transformed into *possibilities* for teachers, to which the use of new technologies and the promotion of, or participation in, curricular activities involving the school community are also added.

Well, the 1990s were really the great decade. It was a major boost in communication, wasn't it? In the 1990s I began to throw myself into it (forgive the expression), I started to become interested, I started using the computer. Using the computer at school . . . using it with the students (. . .) I had a computer in the classroom with my children, and it was fascinating. (Clara, 1C)

And I was the History coordinator. And then, with my crazy ideas, I decided to propose that the group organise a week of activities [. . .] And I managed—we managed—to mobilise the whole school! (Fátima, 2C)

Factors identified as negative at the micro level include the intensification of work, associated or not with digitalisation, and other sources of instability, such as physical or relational conditions in the workplace.

At the meso level, professional relationships—between the inside and the outside of the school—take on central importance. Positive aspects include collaborative work, participation in international projects and pedagogical movements, and professional learning (academic or in-service, with or without a research component), as well as the assumption of other educational roles.

Then I was invited by the school cluster leadership to take responsibility for the first-cycle libraries created by a colleague. (Rute, PS)

[. . .] There was an international meeting of the Freinet movements here in Portugal, [. . .] in Lisbon. [. . .] [I thought] “this is how I want to be a teacher”. [. . .] That affected me profoundly. (Morgana, 1C)

Professional learning, whether in-service or academic, enables teachers to encounter role models and provides confidence in pedagogical experiments and choices. This is complemented by self-directed learning and involvement in socio-educational initiatives.

[. . .] precisely since the end of my doctorate [. . .] it changed my way [. . .] of being in the classroom, in the sense of using much more, doing many more activities and exercises, so to speak, with the body. [. . .] So, it changed completely. (Morgana, 1C)

Possibilities also emerge from the positive aspects mentioned above: colleagues; and again, membership of pedagogical and professional associations and learning communities.

I invited some colleagues whom I already knew from work I had done with M. in the action-research project. That was also a wonderful project. (Fernanda, 2C)

That was the great . . . moment of more serious work, in terms of in-service training, which was the work I did with the Modern School Movement [. . .] which was symbolic for me in terms of becoming aware, and of greater conceptualisation of many things. (Luísa, PS)

[At the university] we got to know extraordinary teachers, F. [. . .] Professor A. from N., many, many of them. All very good! There was one . . . I don't remember the name, but that one was the best of all. (Glória, 2C)

Identified as constraints are changes in school—family relationships; changes in school organisation and their implications for autonomy; performance evaluation and the competitive relationships it generates; increased bureaucratisation; injustices in career progression; and the extension of compulsory time spent in school.

In the last year I taught, as I really wanted to leave [. . .] I felt very exhausted because teaching had also changed a lot [. . .] tasks that had nothing to do directly with teaching. (Clorinda, 3CS)

[. . .] all of this affected me deeply, these injustices in career progression, all of that. (Adelaide, PS)

The permanent timetable at school, with more hours, made it impossible for some teachers to develop creativity, which had been excellent in projects, in dedication to the school, and in developing activities with students. (Constança, 2C)

At the macro-social level, educational policies stand out. Although most viewpoints are negative, there are also positive factors, particularly those related to the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, including the extension of compulsory schooling, improvements in teachers' salaries, new proposals for students' formative assessment, projects initiatives, the system of teacher education and qualification, curricular guidelines for early childhood education, conditions of professional stability, and the pandemic.

The pandemic forced teachers to open up the school, not to be afraid to speak with the door open. (Zacarias, 1C)

[With nine years of compulsory schooling] in 1986 [. . .] students arrived [. . .] from all backgrounds, from all social classes [. . .] students who answered back, students who didn't know how to speak to teachers. [. . .] I felt it strongly, but I experienced it as a challenge for myself. [. . .] I had to succeed. (Otávia, 3CS)

As previously noted, the majority of the statements at this level are strongly negative.

I'll tell you, everything got worse when M. (the Minister of Education) was in office. (Maria Luís, 2C)

Table 2. Synthesis of the results coming both from deductive and inductive analyses.

Professionalism	Factors
Positive characteristics - They focus on students' academic and personal success, including those who are socio-economically and culturally more vulnerable. - They implement innovative ways of teaching and of organising pedagogical work. - They develop collaborative relationships with colleagues. - They take initiative, are proactive, and are aware of the importance of interpersonal relationships with students and colleagues. - They work with enthusiasm beyond the hours they are formally required to fulfil. - They value knowledge and consistently relate theory and practice. - They actively seek professional learning opportunities and implement what they learn in practice. - They draw on recognised theories and reference authors to frame and justify their pedagogical action. - They engage in communities of practice and in professional associations with a didactic–pedagogical focus. - Their students achieve academic success; they themselves may act as teacher educators, practicum supervisors, or school leaders, yet express a strong desire to return to classroom teaching.	Positive factors at the micro level - Students, particularly those who have the most to gain from schooling. - New forms of pedagogical work: innovative ways of teaching and learning and of constructing the pedagogical relationship, which teachers either design themselves or learn through experience. - Reference figures, whether colleagues or former or current teachers. - Creative experiences and joint action between the school and the community. - Accumulated professional experience (stabilisation and diversification phases). Positive factors at the meso level - Professional relationships, particularly with colleagues. - Pedagogically oriented projects initiated by teachers themselves or participation in projects and programmes (some governmental, but with a strong pedagogical focus). - Continuing professional development and academic training. - The assumption of other educational roles and functions. Positive factors at the macro level Educational policies that promoted the quality of students' education and teachers' working conditions, including: - the teaching career statute introduced in the 1990s; - the creation of school-based curricular areas, fostering collective educational spaces; - formative assessment of students; - the extension of compulsory schooling, first to Year 9 and later to Year 12; - improved conditions for teacher education, qualification, and professional certification. Factors with negative overtones - The organisation of schools into clusters, -leading to greater distancing, depersonalisation, and digitalisation of relationships. - The loss of professional autonomy and the exponential increase in administrative work, which leaves insufficient time and space for students. - Performance evaluation systems that generate less solidarity in professional relationships and greater isolation among teachers. - Career freezes, preventing salary increases and progression within the teaching career. - Governmental discourses that have devalued teachers and the teaching profession.
Negative characteristics - They lack sufficient time for students, for pedagogical work, and for the implementation of projects. - A large proportion of school work is perceived as lacking meaning, with excessive time spent on bureaucratic tasks. - Professional relationships are marked by isolation and competition. - They feel undermined by performance evaluation systems that externally define what constitutes a "good" teacher. - Parents and the wider community no longer show the same level of respect for teachers as in the past.	

I think that regarding C. (the Minister of Education), he destroyed all the existing education legislation. He changed everything. So everything had to be rebuilt [afterwards]. (Morgana, 1C)

[...] assessment is very constraining for the evaluator [...] we [have to] restrict ourselves to a report, when that report may not convey anything ... about what is really happening. (Rute, PS)

For example, how does the Ministry address educational problems by going over teachers' heads [...] It's not about government A or B. No, no, it was transversal. [...] And that's why

nowadays there is such demotivation among teachers—those who are still here and want to leave, and those who no longer even enter the profession, which is dramatic. (Noel, PS)

Discussion of the results

This study addresses four questions: i) What characteristics define the professionalism of the participant teachers, ii) Can it be considered a form of transformative professionalism, iii) What factors impacted the development of this professionalism, and iv) What role do socio-ecologies and teachers' life cycles play in this process. The convergence of deductive and inductive analyses strengthens the credibility of the findings and provides a coherent basis for interpretation (Amado, 2014). Table 2 synthesises this convergence, bringing together the main characteristics of teachers' professionalism and the micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors associated with positive and negative meanings.

The deductive analysis points to the existence, from the perspective of teachers' lived experiences, of the characteristics of a 'positive professionalism', which developed throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, and of a 'negative professionalism' that emerged, broadly speaking, from the 2000s onwards. The former is associated with a sense of well-being and the latter with a sense of malaise.

Using the dimensions and components of Evans's (2014) model as a reference, this 'positive professionalism' can be described as solidaristic (with very strong *motivation* rooted in students and oriented towards justice and social change), *creator and collaborative* (processes), competent (*competences and products*) and *intellectual* (across all components of the intellectual dimension). It is a form of professionalism that aligns with many of the features identified by Mockler (2005) and Torrance and Forde (2017), among others, in their discussions of transformative professionalism—namely requirements of agency, emotional resilience, individual and collective commitment, articulation between theory and practice, the capacity to identify problems and interpret situations, a desire for improvement and collaborative work, and the willingness 'to foster positive social change through his or her work' (Baker-Doyle, 2017, p. 4).

Regarding the participants in this study, particular emphasis is placed on their attachment to students, their social justice-inspired orientation and their commitment to social change. Their constant focus on students from socio-culturally disadvantaged backgrounds can be linked to the historical moment in which they entered the profession, when Portuguese schools beyond primary education were first opening to all children and young people. Prior to this period, teaching at post-primary levels was largely an elite profession. These teachers' focus on students resonates with what Orlando and Sawyer (2013, p. 13) refer to in the Project Teachers for a Fair Go: '[for them] the notion of "challenging" need not always mean "difficult". "Challenge" carries with it the sense of "a call to engage" [...] as an invitation to develop their skills, knowledge and practices'. As observed among Estonian VET teachers in the 1990s following the fall of the Berlin Wall (Goodson & Ümarik, 2019), the broader socio-political context is also relevant here: a period of national renewal that strengthened teachers' future-oriented perspectives, impacting what Biesta et al. (2015) describe as the projective dimension of agency, which Quan et al. (2019) identify as more influential for student success than any other factor.

This attachment to students appears to be the core of these teachers' positive professionalism. However, it would not be sustainable if based on this element alone. Teachers are successful in achieving their goals through innovative pedagogical work, strong relationships with colleagues, and the development of curricular activities involving the whole school, as well as both formal and informal professional learning (Evans, 2019). Others within the educational field—particularly colleagues—are therefore indispensable to the realisation of these objectives. Although proactive, these teachers depend on collective elaboration. As Biesta et al. (2015) argue, agency is not an individual attribute but a force that emerges from purposeful relational networks deeply embedded in professional knowledge.

Regarding professional knowledge, it is important to note that these teachers benefited from the development of educational research and scholarship in Portugal, especially from the late 1980s onwards. This development nurtured the intellectual dimension of their professionalism, providing access to new knowledge, enabling the confirmation or rejection of established practices, and allowing for the integration of diverse forms of professional knowledge. Alexander and Perche (2024, p. 1205) highlight the importance of teachers' intellectual well-being and clarify, as Biesta et al. (2015) do about agency, that it is not individual but relational and prospective: 'the nurturing of authentic selves can only be achieved in concert with others, and with the ideas of others. [...] we invoke the term *noetic syntonia* to capture the experience of intellectual wellbeing as a process of resonance (or dissonance) with others, resulting from deep, ethically driven dialogue about the world.'

In summary, creative autonomy, relational and prospective agency, and engagement with professional knowledge together constitute this 'positive professionalism', whose primary driving force lies in students and social change.

The inductive analysis also identifies factors that promote 'positive professionalism'. At the micro level, students emerge as the primary source of motivation for a committed and transformative professionalism. All factors, whether internal or external to the school, that contribute to students' academic and personal success act as promoters of this form of professionalism. Reference figures, such as colleagues or former and current teachers encountered through professional development or academic training, also play a key inspirational role. Additional micro-level factors include access to new teaching materials (for example, digital technologies that open up new pedagogical possibilities; Monteiro et al., 2020), engagement in activities involving the whole school and the community, and the sense of professional security acquired over time, which teachers commonly locate in the 1990s, after approximately twenty years of service (Huberman, 1992). Notably, at this level, involvement in transformative practices tends to generate renewed motivation.

At the meso level, professional relationships are central. Colleagues are crucial in nurturing this professionalism, alongside participation in challenging and promising projects or programmes offered from outside the school (some governmental, but with a strong pedagogical focus). These include initiatives aimed at promoting student success, enhancing teachers' work as classroom researchers, and, later, international exchange projects. Continuing professional development or academic training actively chosen by teachers, as well as the exercise of other educational roles, are also factors that promote 'positive professionalism' at this level.

Crucially, and in line with Evetts's (2011) emphasis on coherence across ecological levels, the development of positive professionalism appears to depend on the existence of a substantial interface between teachers' professional projects and those of governance. In Dehghan's (2022) terms, this represents an articulation between 'bottom-up professionalism' and 'top-down professionalism'. Bolívar (2007), in a more dynamic formulation, refers to an articulation of efforts moving both inside out and outside in.

Factors with negative meanings are primarily located at the macro level, but they interfere at the micro and meso levels. From the first decade of the new millennium onwards, when these teachers were around 50 years old and had approximately 30 years of service, these conditions changed profoundly from their perspective, giving rise to 'negative professionalism', akin to the negative of a photograph. This 'negative professionalism' is a top-down form of professionalism only that undermines the core of teachers' motivation—students' success achieved through proactive, collaborative and creative work—making the development of teachers and teaching impossible and, consequently, generating demotivation, malaise or burnout (Sánchez-Suricalday et al., 2025).

As anticipated by Biesta et al. (2015), Boylan et al. (2017), Ehrenfeld (2022), and Goodson and Ümarik (2019), the impact of educational ecologies on the development of teacher professionalism becomes visible. During the 1990s, improvements in the national socio-economic context, in teacher education and qualification, and in the development of educational knowledge converged with the experience of these teachers, whose professional ideals were already consolidated and effective. It also appears that, at this point, the three levels of transformative professionalism identified by Lopes et al. (2024) were simultaneously present: mature (with students), democratic (with colleagues and leadership), and societal (with governance and society). Teachers were confident in their professional projects; schools were highly dynamic; management practices were participatory; collaboration and joint work had a positive impact on the community; society recognised the importance of teachers; and governments invested in educational transformation.

The relationship between governance and teachers in schools followed a process of negotiation consistent with the meaning Claude Dubar (1995) attributes to the 'construction of identity for real social change'. With this concept, Dubar introduces an ethical and communicative dimension into thinking about professional identities (Mangin, 2019). From the perspective of identity construction, the early decades of these teachers' careers appear to have been marked by this communicative ethic (conceptualised by Dubar, 1995, drawing on; Habermas, 1981), in which macro, meso, and micro-level systems formed a communicative mode characterised by 'proposals (from governance) in situations of uncertainty (open to adaptation)' and 'requests (from teachers) in situations of openness' rather than closure—that is, a process of negotiation and adaptation (Lopes, 2009). From the perspective of teachers' lived experience, the development of professionalism involved both accommodation and assimilation (Piagetian terms also used by Dubar, 1995): the former encouraging teachers to go beyond their existing frames of reference, and the latter allowing teachers to evolve in line with their identities, which act as fundamental mediators of change processes (Day & Kington, 2008).

The opposite occurs in 'negative professionalism'. Ways of being a teacher are imposed from outside, like costumes assigned to characters (Chiang & Trezise,

2021). The factors that hinder the development of positive professionalism are those that obstruct the realisation of the professional project that inspired these teachers to choose teaching: the exponential increase in administrative work, leaving insufficient space for pedagogical work with and for students; distancing, depersonalisation, and the digitalisation of school relationships; the external imposition of a professional identity; and the loss of material and symbolic status. In this reversal, both ecologies and people changed. From the 2000s onwards, the social and institutional context changed, as did the phase of their careers in which teachers found themselves. The organisation and regulation of teachers' work and schools changed substantially, and teacher demotivation increased. In Portugal, as in other countries where managerialism has had a strong impact (Australia, the USA, the UK), the teaching profession has become less attractive (Thomas Dotta et al., 2025).

Meanwhile, as Sachs (2016) argues, neoliberal-inspired educational policies have progressively demonstrated their ineffectiveness, opening the way for reflection and research into new forms of regulating teachers' work. Even though it refers to a past time in terms of the most positive aspects of professionalism characterised here, the results of this article can inform this (re)professionalisation (Torrance & Forde, 2017) in a very concrete way. As the research was based on teachers' life stories, they result also in very rich tools for teacher training (pre-service or in-service) and teacher trainers.

The findings regarding how ecologies and life cycles interact in shaping teacher professionalism require further investigation. Nevertheless, the convergence in the 1990s between teachers' professional projects and the national project for educational development deserves particular emphasis, as does the divergence between teachers' professional projects and the educational development agenda in the first two decades of the new millennium. This finding has strong potential value and calls for further, more detailed comparative studies. Research into the lives of teachers from other cohorts—particularly those who entered the profession in the 1990s and 2000s—would be especially important, as the oscillations between ecological levels for these cohorts (with new social and educational content) are likely to be substantially different. The same applies to comparative studies between countries.

Another limitation of the study is its focus on 'committed' teachers. While this choice allowed, on the one hand, to examine the professionalism of teachers widely recognised in their contexts through a biographical-narrative approach, it also prevented the identification of other types of teacher professionalism that may have coexisted during the same period, which would have been highly informative. A broader study, using a different methodology but involving randomly selected participants from the same cohort, would make this possible.

Finally, although the most positive aspects of professionalism identified in this study relate to a past period, the findings can nonetheless inform contemporary processes of (re)professionalisation (Torrance & Forde, 2017) in concrete and practical ways. Because the research is grounded in teachers' life stories, it also offers particularly rich resources for initial and continuing teacher education, as well as for the work of teacher educators.

Conclusion

Drawing on an investigation into the construction of Portuguese teachers' professionalism over the last 50 years, this article sought to identify its key characteristics and the factors that have favoured or hindered its development. The study made it possible to identify a type of professionalism that we term 'positive professionalism', whose characteristics closely align with those proposed by Mockler (2005) and Lopes et al. (2024). The comparison between this form of professionalism and 'negative professionalism' highlights the importance, during the 1990s, of coherence between different ecological systems, of sustained engagement with educational knowledge, and of the relational and prospective dimensions of teacher agency. Attachment to children and young people (students), oriented towards social justice, emerges as the starting point for the entire development of these teachers' professionalism, under the conditions outlined above.

These findings, relating both to retired teachers and to those still in service (approximately 50%), may be particularly valuable for reflection and research on new forms of regulation of teachers' work that foster the development of an inspiring professionalism oriented towards teachers' and students wellbeing and development.

Notes

1. In Portuguese educational research, both past and present, the term *transformation* is rarely used. Instead, *innovation* is more commonly employed, not in a technical sense, but to refer to actions with transformative intent. For the purposes of international dialogue, this study therefore adopts the term 'transformative' rather than 'innovative'.
2. The choice of the term committed rather than innovative reflects its greater independence from other positionings, particularly political ones. In some contexts, innovative introduces divisions between groups, an effect this study sought to avoid.

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Ethics statement

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