

Challenging school libraries in Portugal: Compromise, consideration, communication and collaboration¹

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School libraries in Portugal are facing several problems concerning their integration in school's culture. This situation is due to different factors, which I intend to analyse in this paper. The first one comes from central administration and the institutionalization of the role of teacher-librarian. At the school level, the commitment of school administrators and the collaboration with classroom teachers also need special attention.

1. Introduction

The four Cs I have included in the title represent four major challenges that school libraries in Portugal are facing today. In fact, although the Ministry of Education, since 1997 and by means of the RBE (school libraries network), has implemented, with financial and management support, school libraries in almost the entire country, the situation in the field is still far from what is suggested by international standards, in particular concerning the integration of libraries in school programmes and in collaborative activities between the teacher-librarian and classroom teachers.

Today we have nice buildings and well furnished school libraries in some schools, but that number is still far from the global number of schools in our country (about 1660 schools have been financed since 1997 through the school libraries network in a universe of 8552 schools²). In fact, central administration and local authorities have been making an effort – in particular by creating the physical conditions for a good school library. The global amount spent since 1997 can be found in the web site of RBE and by looking at those numbers we may say that important steps have been done towards the creation of modern libraries at schools. The old furniture has been replaced, students have now free access to book-shelves with new collections and other improvements have been implemented. But, as Ken Haycock (1997) and other investigators have pointed out, the mere presence of staff, facility and resources are important issues but not sufficient to create “real” school libraries. So, we need to put into practice some fundamental conditions for the effective use of library resources and

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² The official numbers for 2005/2006 are the following:

Total	EB1 e EB1/JI	EB2 e EB1,2	EBI	EBI/JI	EB2,3	EB2,3/ES	ES e ES/EB3	ESA	EP
8586	7370	34	53	33	612	78	382	3	21

Schools Integrated in the RBE : 1660 schools (713 are primary schools – EB1 and EB1/JI).

we need to evaluate what is really being done in our schools concerning several aspects of the integration of libraries in school programmes.

This is the main objective of a project that I am coordinating in the Centre for Research in Education and Innovation (Universidade Aberta, Lisbon). With this project, that is just beginning now (I expect that in the next IASL Conference I can present the results of that study) we want to analyse the situation of school libraries integrated in the network/RBE (the first phase of the project includes only schools on levels EB2 and EB2/3) according to several international standards and national specifications. Some explanatory work that the research group has already done and the evaluation made by de RBE in 2000-2001 reveal that a number of schools are implementing good practices, but when we look at the whole picture we see too much gaps which tell us that a lot of work still has to be done and that some measures are urgently needed. So, in the next paragraphs I want to explain certain aspects that I consider crucial for the future of school libraries in Portugal, a future that begins now.

1. Challenging school libraries

Consideration and compromise

Consideration and compromise are the first challenges I would like to point out and these two aspects have implications at several levels. The first level is situated at the Ministry of Education, itself, because we need, urgently, the institutionalized recognition of the position of the teacher-librarian in the school organization. In fact, after almost ten years of hard work trying to take forward a good project for Portuguese school libraries, as we can read in the guided lines published in “Lançar a rede” (“Launching the network”, 1996), I think it’s time to take a full compromise with schools and with students. School libraries are really important for the teaching and learning process and the existence of an effective school library in our schools does not match with the current situation. With only 8 hours per week working in the school library, it’s really difficult for Portuguese teacher librarians to implement good programmes in their schools attending the mission of the school library and the different roles that teacher librarians have to accomplish.

The research has proved that the existence of a full-time teacher-librarian – with a solid formation in the field, a professional situation with stability and a good average of time spent working with students and teachers – is critical for the maintenance of the school library programme. But, besides this evidence, the central administration (i.e. the Ministry of Education) continues insisting on the maintenance of a situation that causes real damage to efforts for implementation of good school libraries activities plan, originating a discrepancy between what approved guidelines advises and the reality of everyday life in schools. And we need political decisions that make people believe that education is a major purpose for our Government. In a more pragmatic way, I think that the money invested in the fulfilment and organization of school libraries must really contribute to the improvement of the teaching and learning process. For this to become real schools need good full-time teacher librarians.

A major consequence is that in most school libraries the coordinator spends a great part of his/her time taking the more traditional responsibilities of the teacher librarian, those of organizing and developing the school library collection and services. This can be seen when we analyse the results of the evaluation that were taken by RBE in the year 2000-2001. When respondents were asked about the most relevant activities developed during the year, the answers indicate that the team spent more than 60% of its time on the organization of materials and services. The results don’t tell us about the collaborative work with classroom

teachers, but the global item “support to curriculum activities” – which may rest, after all, in more traditional roles such as students orientation or students and teachers assistance in finding materials – only occupies about 25% of time. In fact, organizing resources is an important task, but the key question for a school library is to relate the resource centre to the curriculum and we don’t want to say, like Michel Marland, that in some schools books “constitute some of the most expensive wallpaper known, because they are ineffectively used” (1999, p. 49).

The lack of compromise of central administration is also reflected on the commitment of school administrators towards the school library. In most situations, the consequence is the absence of quality criteria in the selection of the school resource centre coordinator and team. In fact, it is recognised that a good professional preparation for the position and specific personal attributes are fundamental for the success of the integration of the school library in the school’s culture. But, although some recommendations regarding the constitution of library staff, sometimes the schools don’t take into account the need of good teams in the success of the library programme. I agree with Ken Haycock when he says that “the principal is the single most important factor in the development of a strong library program” (1999, p. 5)

These aspects also influence the way classroom teachers look at the school-librarians. He/she needs to have the profile of a leadership to be considered by colleagues. That’s the way to improve the integration of the school library in the educational activities. And that’s the way to create a compromise of the whole school in relation to the school resource centre. The role of the school librarian is a very demanding one and he/she needs the institutional and personal conditions to support a strong position in the school organization.

So, the selection for the teacher-librarian position and for the library team is a decision that matters and it’s not compatible with criteria based only on administrative timetable fulfilment. The skills needed for the construction and maintenance of the school library programme – in different areas such as selection and organization of materials, planning and management, information skills, collaborative planning and teaching, among others – require proficiency and professionalism and a qualified teacher on the field.

Communication and Collaboration

The next two Cs are for communication and collaboration. As we know, communication is a fundamental way to share ideas within the school and communication allows us to share a “vision” of the school library as a central resource for the learning process. The challenge of a collaborative partnership among teachers and teacher-librarian is also at the centre of communication at school and it is a major problem in Portuguese context. In fact, we do need to introduce a change in the traditional teaching methods, in particular in what concerns the use of a variety of resources. That is a remarkable challenge for our schools and our teachers and the teacher-librarians are at the centre of that change, which is also a “change in the cultural norms of their school, from privacy and self-reliance to collegiality and experimentation” (Oberg, p. 41).

Communication also links to leadership and to the capacity of transmitting the purpose of the programme. To share the mission and the goals of the school library is the first step for the integration of the school library in the school culture but it fails in many schools. In fact, in our schools there is a lack of dialogue and individualism is still the norm and a factor that is difficult to strike, influencing the way the school resource centre is regarded and assumed. I

won't say that the library programme rests only on teacher contact but in fact it's important that classroom teachers and teacher-librarians work in partnership and for that to happen communication is required. And if we agree that at this moment the central roles of the teacher-librarian are on the collaborative work with classroom teachers for the implementation of resource-based strategies and on the information skills instruction integrated in curriculum areas we must emphasise the necessity of qualified teacher-librarian in our schools.

Research has proved that close collaboration between classroom teachers and teacher-librarian is essential for the success of the library programme, providing the effective library use. So, particularly in Portuguese schools, we need school-librarians with a strong presence to ensure an equal status to other teachers and to emphasise that they are partners in the educational enterprise. Several studies about the teacher-librarian profile and about collaboration (for example, those available online at AASL web page) show the importance of effective leadership.

3. Final Remarks

All these aspects must be analysed because they have direct consequences on the ways school libraries are working. We must face the reality and we must work to change what needs to be changed. Some things are in our own hands and for the others we have to press on the administration to take the necessary measures. In this domain, studies in the history and sociology of education have shown us that the practice in education tends to be conservative and evolves slower than the conditions for changing that came from outside – legislation, innovation in pedagogical thinking, contributes from research, and so on. Each change means an endogenous integration of new values and this is something that does not happen immediately.

Concerning the Portuguese situation, where schools have to apply to central network (RBE) for financial support to make improvements in the school library, I think we must put special attention in the follow up situation. The desire of schools to integrate the school libraries network in Portugal (RBE) implies (or it should imply) a compromise from schools – a compromise that demands a wish of renewal and of transformation in some educational practices.

As mentioned above, in the project I am coordinating we want to know how the RBE programme is being implemented locally. We intend to recognize at what extent the school library is integrated in the school culture, what kind of strategies are being taken into account for the reputation/status and use of the library resource centre and the sort of activities that school librarians implement in correlation with the major issues of the RBE orientations and with the international studies and findings. We want to identify where the major problems in Portuguese context are located but also which factors may contribute to the successful implementation of library programs.

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