

Collaboration or parallel worlds? Information literacy practices in Portuguese school libraries

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will focus on two major aspects of my research as coordinator of a master's degree for Teacher Librarians (TL) in Portugal and as advisor to the national school libraries network: the practices and experiences of school libraries (SL) regarding information literacy (IL), and the impacts of some recent developments in the Portuguese school context, in particular the implementation of a self-evaluation model for school libraries, on the IL practices of teacher librarians and classroom teachers.

During recent years a rapid growth in access to information and communication technologies could be observed in Portugal as well as in other European countries. The Portuguese Technological Plan for Education (2007) has been playing an important role in the educational context, encouraging schools and teachers to open classrooms to new technologies and to prepare pupils for the challenges of the knowledge society.

In fact, it is necessary that pupils have an active intervention in the learning process, and we must help them to improve the reflective and active construction of personal knowledge. This is a primary condition for the challenges of contemporary society, and schools need to focus on equipping students with transferable skills which will allow them to play a full role in the information society. This context also requires the promotion of different ways of working within schools: collaborative work among teachers and the integration of transversal competencies, like IL, stimulating the cohesion within the educational programme and/or between the different subjects.

Considering the three dimensions of the Technological Plan – knowledge, technology and innovation – we have to say that since 2007 some important steps have been accomplished in the context of Portuguese schools, for example, the connection to broadband Internet in every school in the country and the opening of schools to virtual environments, by supplying schools with new computers and interactive boards, and also by offering the possibility to students, families and teachers to buy personal computers at a lower price. But at the same time some investigations show that knowledge about available services, technological skills and information literacy competences are still not developed well enough.

In this larger context, school libraries play a fundamental role and I will focus my analysis on what is happening in that respect. In Portugal, SL have been more and more appreciated by the school community. We have a national network – the School Libraries Network (SLN) – that is responsible for the development of SL in collaboration with local authorities. And in 2008 I participated in the conception and implementation of a self-evaluation model for SL, through this public agency.

A key issue for this model is specifically school practices concerning IL and curriculum cooperation between SL and teachers.

Through the meta-analysis of a body of master's dissertations developed under my coordination, I intend to identify the practices and experiences of school libraries regarding information literacy. The master's programme, called Information Management and School Libraries, at the Portuguese Open University, started in 2005. The students are all Teacher Librarians who want to acquire specific training in the field to increase their knowledge and competencies. From the very beginning of the master's programme one of its research objectives was to improve the knowledge about concepts and practices in IL in school libraries.

SCHOOL LIBRARIES AND IL PRACTICES – RESULTS FROM THE RESEARCH

The following table summarizes the main characteristics of the studies included in this meta-analysis.

| STUDY | STUDY DESIGN / METHODS | UNIVERSE | TL PROFILE (VARIABLES) |
|--|--|--|---|
| IL Practices in SL (Reis, 2007) | Quantitative | 20 schools (North Portugal) | TL - 8h-14h per week TL instruction |
| IL practices in SL (Bastos, 2007) | Quantitative | 37 schools (North Portugal) | TL - 8h-14h per week TL instruction |
| IL practices and collaboration (Freire, 2007) | Action research | 1 TL / school (Central Portugal) TL/ T (mother tongue department) | TL – full time TL instruction |
| IL Practices in SL (Tomé, 2008) | Quantitative Questionnaire | 26 Schools (Central Portugal) | TL –full time Integration in SLN TL instruction |
| IL practices in SL (Mendinhos, 2009) | Quantitative – questionnaire Qualitative – interviews | 9 schools (Lisbon region) 9 TL (quantitative) 3 TL (qualitative) | TL –full time Integration in SLN TL instruction |
| IL practices and collaboration (Santos, 2010) | Qualitative Interviews/ observation | 3 TL / schools (Central Portugal) | TL – full time |
| IL practices and collaboration (Castanheira, 2009) | Action research | 1 TL / school (Lisbon region) | TL – full time |

From the analysis of the study's results, one can draw several conclusions. The first conclusion – with a relevant position throughout the period of time covered by these studies – is that, in general, Teacher Librarians are still not aware of the importance

of Information Literacy. Earlier studies show that most of the TLs' work was related to the traditional library activities:

1. Organization of information.
2. Introducing the library to learners (at the beginning of the school year): guided visits to the library; how to use the library; library skills.

The most important activities listed by the TLs were the following:

3. Supporting students during their work in the SL – for instance, technological support.
4. And, less frequently: supporting teachers in curriculum – to find and to give information according to teacher's needs.

What regard specifically to Information Literacy, the findings are not very positive. In the following paragraphs I will briefly present these aspects, adding some comments.

1. There is a misunderstanding concerning the concept of IL – some answers show that there is a mix-up with reading promotion and with library skills (how to use the library). With Taylor (2006, p. 6), we must distinguish library skills from IL: “Information literacy is not library instruction or library skills. Library skills focus on helping students understand how to use specific resources [...] While information literacy skills do include accessing information, they go far beyond that, to using and thinking about information.”
2. IL models are unknown to most Teacher Librarians.
3. Students' competences are still not developed well enough – mainly, we see that the intervention of TL in the field occurs once a year (almost always at the beginning of the school year) to instruct pupils about information skills, but there is no further work with teachers and no skills training in context, that is, integrated with curriculum content.
4. Teacher training for the development of IL competences is minimal, though we know that most teachers are not aware of the importance of this issue.
5. is little collaborative work between TL and other teachers. And we recognize that thinking together about activities and conducting activities together are crucial factors for success in this field, as several international studies have already identified. So, it seems that we still have two parallel worlds – SL and classrooms – that, most of the time, work separately.

Information literacy accentuates the need for careful retrieval and selection of available information and places prime emphasis on recognizing message quality, authenticity and credibility. IL education emphasizes critical thinking, meta-cognition, and procedural knowledge used to locate information in specific domains, fields, and contexts (Hobbs, 2006). So, for this to happen in all its fulness we need the intervention of an information specialist, that is, the Teacher Librarian, and of the content specialist, i.e. the subject teacher, in particular at higher grade levels.

The analysis of the dissertation findings led us also to other important factors that have a significant influence in TL's work.

1. To achieve a deeper understanding of some results we have to take into consideration the professional situation of teacher librarians. In Portugal, until 2008 TL was a part-time function – the TL was also responsible for some regular classes. As coordinator of the School Library, he/she spent 8 to 14 hours per week working in the SL, according to the number of students. The implementation of the National Reading Plan, in 2007, and the government's concern with the success of the Technological Plan for Education led to the creation of the position of TL in the school structure. In 2007/2008 the Portuguese Ministry of Education began to create conditions for having full-time TLs in school libraries and this situation resulted in a significant increase in the activities of SL and in the possibility of strengthening their work. So, the situation described above requires us to distinguish two phases: TL's work before and after 2008.
2. Another important factor is the training of teacher librarians in this specific field. Over and above the number of years' experience as TL, all studies have identified training as one of the main factors that positively influence the work developed by TLs. Specialized training and training in various areas (information literacy, library management and evaluation, reading promotion, evidence practice) have a positive impact in TL performance.

The synergy between these two aspects, which began to occur mainly after 2007/2008, gives us important clues to understanding some good practices identified in this second phase, even if some of the problems I have pointed out before still remain. In more recent studies we can recognize:

- (i) An effort to implement an IL model to be applied by all teachers – TL report that there is severe resistance to this issue, but also a great lack of knowledge on this field, so the intervention and support of the TL towards other school teachers is very important, namely as a teacher trainer.
- (ii) An effort to involve the whole school in IL competences development. Projects are a privileged area of work: all students have this subject and teachers are more available to collaborate with TL on this and to use various resources in teaching and learning (most teachers only use textbooks). Portuguese language teachers are also interested in promoting active practices including IL (because most TL began as Portuguese language teachers it is easier to establish collaborative relationships with the Portuguese language department).
- (iii) An effort to connect IL with curriculum subjects and not only as a separate and theoretical exercise done by students in the library with the TL.

The existence of a full-time TL is a very important factor, not just because these TL have more time to work in the library with students and teachers, but because generally they have more training in the field and we find a direct correlation between

more training in different topics and more consistent practices. Involvement in the School Libraries Network is also another positive factor and has a real impact on Teacher Librarians' concepts and practices. This SLN factor leads us to consider the importance and impact of such a structure on TL work and on the way schools look to the SL.

In 2008, SLN launched a self-evaluation model for School Libraries. This model is an important instrument for fostering schools' and SL practices concerning Information literacy. This model had a pilot phase and is now applied in every school. The model was presented at the 38th IASL Conference (cf. Bastos & Martins, 2009) and has been followed and evaluated (cf. Bastos, Conde & Martins, 2011). It covers four domains that represent "essential areas for the accomplishment of school libraries' mission and their teaching and learning objectives" (SLN, 2009) within the school. Some of the features are characteristic of the Portuguese context, but they are all directed towards critical teaching and learning dimensions of SL.

A brief note on the master's dissertations conducted after 2008, where we have some references – even though tentative – about the role played by the self-evaluation model in, for instance, increasing collaboration between teachers and TL. But other aspects can be found, for instance: improvement of TL leadership and more confidence in the work they develop. Nevertheless, some constraints still remain: (1) Resistance to diversification of teaching and learning resources – most of the work is based on textbooks; and (2) Teacher isolation in the classroom – one teacher, one textbook, 25 students all doing the same at the same time.

RETURNING TO THE TITLE

In recent years we can identify some important improvements in Portuguese SL, and research shows some evidences of that progress. The legislation institutionalizing Teacher Librarian as a full-time job recognizes and mentions explicitly the significance of the work done by the TL and its integration into the pedagogical activities of the school. The self-evaluation model is also a new element that brings more visibility to the work of the SL and to the advantages of linkage between the TL and other teachers, specifically with regard to the development of students' competences in Information Literacy.

Nevertheless in some schools IL practices are still undeveloped and emergent, and classroom teachers and TL still live, in a considerable number of schools, in parallel worlds. And more recent developments, motivated by economic constraints, like the obligation of TL to be responsible again for a class, with less time to dedicate to support students and teachers, represent a step backwards from the pedagogical improvements of the last decade (shown in the results of PISA 2010) and may also put in danger a situation that was not yet sufficiently consolidated.

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