

Collaboration and information literacy in Portuguese school libraries: a challenge for the future

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Abstract: This paper is based on the analysis of the interviews conducted in 2006/07, as part of a PhD research, and on the work developed in teaching a Master course, at Universidade Aberta in the academic years 2013/14, 2014/15 and 2015/16 whose students are teacher librarians or belong to the school library team. One of the main conclusions of the PhD research was about the need for a real collaboration between teachers and teacher librarian, and not just coordination or cooperation, aiming at students' school success and educational attainment as well as the development of their information literacy skills. Although all Master students of those three academic years agree on the benefits of true collaboration, they could only identify coordination and cooperation practices in their daily work.

Keywords: Collaboration, Information Literacy, School Libraries, Teacher Librarians, Universidade Aberta, Portugal

1. Introduction

The autonomous or "independent" learning skills, as stated in *Information literacy standards for student learning* (AASL, 1998), presupposes the mobilization and continuous update of the competencies inherent to the process of research and evaluation of information, essential to empower students to real life in the information and digital society.

The importance of ensuring a learning process that allows transferring learning from the school context for daily life is highlighted in IFLA/UNESCO guidelines for school libraries (IFLA/UNESCO, 2006). To achieve this "philosophy" learning skills are pointed out to develop a model for a study program of information literacy, namely: autonomous learning skills, cooperation, planning, tracking and collecting, selecting, organization and registration, communication and implementation and evaluation.

In the current information society, school libraries (SL) must assume themselves as informational, training and educational centers of the schools. Articulating their action with other educational structures and with teachers, SL should combine efforts to develop in students the acquisition of information skills

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required for their achievement in private life, in society and in professional contexts in order to exercise an active citizenship.

Searching information, identifying it, selecting and evaluating it, synthesizing, reorganizing, presenting and communicating it in new media, is, on the whole, the path to new ways of learning and teaching. In this context, SL are assumed as fundamental structures for the development of a new school model favoring the emergence of innovative modes of educational activity, in collaboration with the school community and the school board.

2. Concept of information literacy

The overwhelming amount of information available on a daily basis, the variety of means to widespread it and the ease of access that information technologies allow lead to a profound change in the traditional way of learning and teaching. Information society requires each of us to consolidate and constantly update knowledge making us to learn throughout our lives. Information literacy allows this lifelong learning because it "enables individuals at all stages of their lives for effectively search, evaluate, use and create information aiming their personal, social, educational and professional goals, which is a basic human right in a digital world and promoting the social inclusion of all Nations" (IFLA/UNESCO, 2005).

Broadly speaking, information literacy is a set of skills that allow a person to recognize when he/she needs information acting efficiently and effectively to obtain it. In this context, there is the effort to identify an informational need, locate, acquire, and critically evaluate the necessary information, organize and incorporate it into the previously acquired knowledge base so that this information can result in a valid action.

The role of libraries in the development of information literacy is crucial because they have a wide variety and quantity of information resources, information management systems and trained staff, which are key actors in this process.

3. Some information literacy models

Information literacy issues have come to the attention of several experts, some of whom have developed models that support the information search process, for several ages / levels of education, taking into account identified lacked information skills. In *Information Literacy Models and Inquiry Learning Models* (<http://ictnz.com/infolitmodels.htm>), there are four models that have been subject of study by Universidade Aberta master students in the master's degree in Information Management and School Libraries: BIG6, the best known and perhaps one that has had greater acceptance and implementation in schools, Carol Kuhlthau's model, PLUS model and the Canadian model.

A brief analysis of these four models allows concluding that all of them are aimed at developing skills, referred to in IFLA/UNESCO (2005), although some in a more exhaustive and detailed way than others. All have structural similarities, with the focus on the learning process competencies for research and information work, based on steps to follow and tasks to perform, in order

to solve an "information problem". The Big 6 model is very complete and flexible, allowing for adaptation to various levels of education and age groups, being the chosen model of many school libraries, as can be easily checked in the web page of several SL. Carol Kuhlthau's ISP model may be appropriate if we want to give more emphasis to the stages of identification and selection of information because this model has been designed and built to make students more aware of the knowledge-building processes. The Canadian model, suitable for secondary students and therefore more autonomous, is the one that requires more complex tasks, especially in terms of information processing. However, being a very complete and comprehensive model in the description of the learning objectives, means and tasks to perform, it seems that its final phase of evaluation and production of critical thinking about the process and the final product is missing but the teacher can, on its own initiative, complete this phase that "looks like" missing. There are models that seek to synthesize key aspects of other models, such as PLUS, however, more fragile in organization skills, synthesis and communication. PLUS model, consisting of four phases, could thus be considered too comprehensive.

The adoption/application/adaptation of a particular model must be seen as a strategy to develop students' skills that will allow them to successfully execute certain tasks. Therefore, it will be essential that schools, as a whole, make a wise choice about the model to adopt in all subject areas contributing, this way, to a greater students' autonomy.

4. Information literacy: the role of the school library and the teacher librarian

In a society where information is power and, so often, also wild and chaotic, it is very important to prepare students to face it critically and intelligently and to teach them how to use it. Learning to read; learning to see and look; learning to listen; learning how to select, learning how to learn is, today, and more than ever, an imperative to be a student, a citizen and, one day, a professional. It's an attitude more than a competency, if we take into account the principle and reality of lifelong learning.

All already mentioned models emphasize the need to establish a method that will allow organizing the research task, through the progression of successive steps; it is the recognition that research, within the "raging sea" of information, needs to be targeted, so that each step is well done and a good result achieved. But, if all those models are good instruments of work, it is no less true, however, that it is up to the teacher (in line with the school) to choose the right model for the right group and occasion; each model can be good or less good, in the light of these factors. Information literacy models are defined in theory but then they have to be chosen depending on the pedagogical reality in which we work.

In this respect, the role of the teacher librarian (TL) and SL's team, in close collaboration with classroom teachers, is crucial, not only in monitoring students' research process, but also in defining a methodology to be followed by the school, contributing to the coherence and consolidation of procedures. For all this to take place teachers will have to interiorize this need with the TL's

help/intervention to implement and develop appropriate methods for the research work requested by teachers. The adoption of appropriate and credible models for the development of information literacy skills in students is critical, allowing to organize the work around the competencies to develop and, at the same time, put the focus on the learning process itself and the information processing research and not only on the results, as often happens. When we consider that the way to accomplish it is as important, or more, than the final result we also have to take into account that this final product will result with more quality when the process has been well conducted and passed through all stages.

The implementation of a model for the development of information literacy skills is related with the role of the TL who acts as an advisor and facilitator of the process, a job that must be closely done in collaboration with classroom teachers.

The choice of a model must be flexible, depending on the characteristics of the three main actors in this process: students, teacher and TL. This is one more task for the TL that involves time and persistence, because getting the whole school to interiorize that being competent in information literacy brings benefits to students, is neither easy nor immediate.

5. Collaboration as an impact factor in educational success

Collaboration between teachers is for Santos (2007) one of the essential aspects of good school practices which objective is to support students and teachers in the acquisition and dissemination of new knowledge.

For collaborative work to exist it may be sufficient, in certain situations, motivating teachers by giving them an incentive. It then arises as necessary the creation of an environment where people are available to help one another so that teachers and other educators can fulfill the "essential mission of ensuring to students – to all students – the fulfillment of their right to learn" (Santos, 2007). This environment depends a lot on how SL are seen by other teachers and the role they play within the school community.

In theory, teachers and researchers seem to agree on the advantages of these methods, both inside and outside the classroom. However, there are few, and no less easy, really collaborative practices, "a paradoxical situation" in the words of Roldão (2007).

Traditionally, teaching has been very lonely (Santos, 2007) with the "classroom door locked" (Ferreira and Almeida, 2003). Teachers are responsible for their classes and inside the classroom take all decisions, assume all responsibilities and go through all difficulties. It is still common to hear "my students" or "my class", which means a very close and affectionate individualized teaching and learning practice. Making the transition from an organization structured in small groups – teachers in their classrooms – to a collaborative organization has been a time-consuming task. It should also be noted that schools have been establishing and maintaining, for almost two centuries, this "not very effective teaching model" (Roldão, 2007) because it is segmented and very independent, with little communication and exchange of experiences and good practices.

6. Collaboration between educational partners

Collaborative work between teachers is frequently referred to in national and international educational literature. Several authors (Boavida and Ponte, 2002; Ferreira and Almeida, 2003; Roldão, 2007; Santos, 2007; Leonard and Leonard, 2001, 2003; Pugach and Johnson, 1998; Fishbaugh, 1998; Hart, 1998; Houston, 1980, cf. Montiel-Overall, 2005) have been analyzing this issue which is regarded as being in "the agenda". Collaboration, for these authors, can be developed among teachers for implementing curricular practices and extracurricular activities; between teacher and researcher(s); between teacher(s) and student(s); between teacher(s) and parents; between teachers and the school board; between institutions and entities. It is however interesting to note that none of those authors includes or mentions TL as participants of the collaborative work. This could be due to ignorance about the role and characteristics of this teacher, his/her role in the school and in the SL or some uncertainty or insecurity of teachers regarding the definition of collaboration and the ways it can and/or should take.

In Portugal, research on the impact that collaborative work between TL and the school teachers can have on pupils' education and school success is still reduced. There is, worldwide and in the information sciences subject area, a varied range of both quantitative and qualitative studies, about libraries and school librarians, which conclude that these improve students' learning and have positive impact on school success. In fact, international literature on collaboration between TL and other school teachers, extending this collaboration to the whole educational community where the school is located, is also wide.

The School Library Manifesto (IFLA/UNESCO, 1999) uses the term "school librarian" and refers to him/her as being a teacher which has specific qualifications for carrying out his/her tasks, works "together with all members of the school community and in connection with the public library and other libraries". It is also mentioned in this Manifesto the proven positive impact of collaborative work between librarians and teachers at various levels: "students reach higher levels of literacy, reading, learning, and problem solving skills in the field of information and communication technologies" (idem).

Keith Curry Lance, on the Library Research Service web page (<http://www.lrs.org>) publishes research on the relationship between school libraries and school success. This researcher is, to date, responsible for impact studies in several American states and based on the quantitative results of these studies, defend the direct relationship between higher educational attainment in schools where there is a librarian and where he/she works in collaboration with teachers by also training them in how to access information, developing, this way, their information literacy skills.

Montiel-Overall (2005, 2006) considers that collaboration between TL and other teachers is an essential factor to support changes in student population, due to the complexity of educational affairs and the exponential increase, in quantity and quality, of information available to students. This author also advocates that collaboration can be the determining factor in the success of school students but

for such, the ones involved in this collaboration should share high levels of interest, engagement, learning, innovation and integration. Based on a literature review and the Loertscher's taxonomy (2000), Montiel-Overall (idem) developed four models of collaboration between TL and teachers: Coordination (model A), Cooperation (model B), Integrated Instruction (model C) and Integrated Curriculum (model D). The degree of involvement between the participants of the collaborative work increases from model to model until it reaches its maximum (model D), stage where TL and teachers, through joint efforts involving thinking, planning, implementing and evaluating, gather regularly to integrate information literacy and the curriculum. TL may, in the early stages, develop isolated strategies for teaching information skills in the hope that students remember to use them if they need. Teachers can teach without the resources and whether students have acquired, or not, the necessary information literacy skills. The last level, the real collaboration happens when there is a coincidence of time and place. This collaboration will always be based on trust, understanding and sharing of common interests. True collaboration between teacher and TL happens when both share responsibilities in planning, teaching and assessing syllabus and information literacy learning processes.

7. Main results of a research conducted in 2006/07

Between late 2006 and early 2007 it was developed the third and penultimate phase of a research work belonging to a doctoral program, which focused on SL of Portuguese Elementary Integrated Schools that until 2005 were part of the Portuguese school libraries network (RBE). In this third phase semi-structured interviews were done to 20 selected TL. The interview was about the impact that teacher librarian's specific training could have on students' educational success, and, in order to collect several opinions TL with and without specific training for performing their duties were interviewed.

The existence of collaborative work at various levels has been pointed out by the interviewed TL as being one of the conditions for promoting educational success of students and the development of information literacy skills. Collaboration was considered as one of the factors that had most influence on developing the work that these TL do inside and outside the SL and there were no significant differences of opinion among them. The analysis of the 20 interviews revealed only coordination and cooperation practices and there was no true collaborative work identified. This situation can be linked to a teaching practice still very focused on the teacher and his/her class or even to the reduced recognition of TL's role inside the school, who, being a teacher, has very specific work objectives and targets.

8. Teacher librarians' opinions in 2013/14, 2014/15 and 2015/16

Thirty two master students from Universidade Aberta (16 in 2013/14, 9 in 2014/15 and 7 in 2015/16) have analyzed, discussed and questioned several of the problems and challenges faced by school libraries. This activity enabled the informal gathering of their opinion about the collaborative work that existed and/or that could be developed between the SL, where they performed their

duties as TL, and the other school teachers. In a specific curricular unit they were proposed to read some documents about collaborative work which was followed by a group reflection about the factors that could contribute to a greater or lesser collaboration between TL and other teachers. One of the resources to which students gained access to was Montiel-Overall's (2006) text, where the author describes the levels of work between TL and teachers. Having this as a reference those 32 master students, belonging to schools from all parts of Portugal mainland but also from the islands Madeira e Açores, characterized the work developed with the other teachers as belonging mostly to model A (12) and model B (12). Model C got only 2 answers and there were six that reported being in a transition process: between A and B models (5 cases) and between B and C models (1 case).

Although these 32 TL feel that there are already some forms of collaborative work the situation is still far from desirable. Therefore, and as a whole, these TL have the opinion that it is essential to proceed with the formulation and implementation of strategies aimed at developing a collaborative culture: whether based on training and awareness of teachers towards the advantages of using SL for their teaching practices; or by disseminating throughout the school community the services and features available on the SL and the benefits that their usage would bring for the success of the teaching-learning process. This can be done either through the establishment of more flexible SL opening hours, or through events in its space, such as workshops, thematic exhibitions, film projections, publication of articles in the school newspaper, or through other ways in order to promote the benefits of collaborative work between teachers and TL, with obvious advantages for everyone involved, especially for students.

9. Some final considerations

In Portugal, and in accordance with the School Libraries report (RBE, 2010), although there is a greater awareness of the SL teams regarding their role in developing information literacy skills and its impact on students' learning, ongoing strategies are still limited and not very comprehensive.

It has been difficult to integrate information literacy into the library activities' plan, in close collaboration with the curriculum teachers, probably due to a number of factors, that, according to Taylor (2006), and evidenced by TL in 2006/07, as in 2013/14, in 2014/15 and in 2015/16, are about the attitudes of teachers and their beliefs with respect to information literacy, the short time available for collaborative work between TL and curriculum teachers, the lack of support of the school board and pedagogical practices very much focused on the teacher, "his/her class" and the textbook.

The success of a SL in fulfilling its mission (educational attainment, educational success, development of information literacy skills) depends a lot on the support and the collaborative work between the various school community partners: TL, curriculum teachers and the school board but also on the educational community where the school is located and how SL's role and value are perceived.

The existence of collaborative work was pointed out and referred to by several TL as essential for the dissemination, promotion and implementation of

practices and models that propitiate the development of fundamental students' skills which enable them for an active citizenship and contribute to the knowledge society in a relevant and informed way.

However, and although there is consensus on the benefits of collaborative work, no example of true collaboration has been identified (model D – Integrated Curriculum) but mainly coordination and cooperation (models A and B, respectively), both in the interviews to TL in 2006/07 as in the opinions of the TL in 2013/14, 2014/15 and 2015/16, who were master students at Universidade Aberta and have expressed their perceptions in discussion forums in the virtual classroom.

This situation can be linked to the teaching practice still very focused on the teacher and his/her class and reduced knowledge about TL's role within the school, who being also a teacher, has specific work objectives and targets. The type of work, usually done and highlighted by TL as being essential to have impact on school success and attainment and on the development of students' information literacy skills, would certainly be more visible and effective if the work would go from coordination and cooperation to true collaboration. In this sense, Small (2002) suggests some possible strategies to be implemented:

- Start by establishing a relationship with only one teacher in developing effective collaborative projects;
- Successful examples of collaboration can become "contagious" given that "success breeds success";
- Have an open and friendly attitude with all teachers: "Go and look for them because they're not coming after you";
- TL's pro-activity is a fundamental prerequisite for a successful collaboration work;
- Organize and disseminate workshops about information literacy for all initiatives help drawing attention to the SL and establishing TL's credibility as a teacher who is professionally qualified to carry out his/her role;
- Build a good relationship with the school board and the pedagogical committee which constitute essential structures for the proper functioning of the SL and TL's image at school;
- Be "up to date" with regard to the school activities' plan, knowing the scheduled events and think of ways for the SL to cooperate actively.

The study conducted in 2006/07 concluded on the need to exist a true collaborative work between teachers and teacher librarian, and not only coordination and cooperation as shown by TL, aiming at school educational success and the development of students' information literacy skills.

In 2013/14, 2014/15 and 2015/16 perceptions collected from 32 Universidade Aberta's master students, regarding collaborative work developed between them and the rest of the educational community, show that although there is still consensus regarding the advantages of collaboration, it was just possible to identify coordination and cooperation practices. It will be mandatory to engage

in true collaboration work, and this is a challenge for the future for all educational partners.

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