

Portuguese School Libraries

The design and implementation of a Self-Evaluation Model

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Abstract

In this paper we propose to present and analyse the School Libraries Self-Evaluation Model created for Portuguese Schools. We focus on its principles and steps leading to implementation. The self-evaluation model is based on four domains which represent essential areas to the accomplishment of school libraries' teaching and learning objectives. Some of the features are characteristic of the Portuguese reality, but they are all directed towards critical teaching and learning dimensions of school libraries.

Keywords: Portuguese school libraries; self-evaluation model; quality; impact in educational success; evidence based practice.

Introduction

In 1996, the Portuguese Ministry of Education created the Portuguese School Libraries Network Programme (SLN), aimed at establishing and developing school libraries in basic and secondary schools. The principles underlying its inception identify the school library as an essential resource of the education system, with a decisive impact on skills and competence development, and on the preparation of the lifelong learner in the information-rich society. School libraries focus on student achievement by providing students with access to resources that stimulate intellectual growth and the development of critical thinking skills. As an integral part of the school curriculum, school libraries create a rich learning environment and play an effective role in supporting students and educators in the development of teaching and learning.

The delivery of a quality school library media program must be enhanced and is a priority to the School Libraries Network, which now faces a new operational stage after having completed the development of a significant number of school libraries and student reach: 100% of the basic schools' student population and 92% for secondary education students benefit from a school library working in accordance with the orientations from the SLN. The sustainability of the programme depends on ensuring ongoing investment and on informing stakeholders on how the school library contributes to success in education, and improved teaching, learning and student performance.

At the same time, Portuguese schools must respond to the priorities established in the governmental agenda, centered on evidence-based policies and *what works* policies, and identification of value-generator services. Several educational reforms are now on the field: changes at management level, creation of new departments and internal structures of power, school and teaching staff assessment and the introduction of the ICT Plan for schools. In this context, school libraries must emphasize their central role in teaching and learning and must reply to the possibilities introduced by new digital environments, which have challenged traditional school library service offer. There is now a generalized sense of urgency pushing services to identify weaknesses and change attitudes and practice to improve standards and attainment.

So, helping school libraries to make a difference and achieve effectiveness and assisting them to measure impact and performance became, in this situation, a priority. The construction of a School Library Self-Evaluation Model is the necessary answer to provide school libraries with a tool that will help them move forward by continuously seeking improvement

The self-evaluation model: background and concepts

For the Portuguese School Libraries Network, ten years after the Program's launching, it became of utmost importance to gather objective information on how school libraries develop and operate, how they contribute for effective student learning and success and for the goals of lifelong learning. This analysis is in itself a basic principle of good management, and a pivotal instrument for project development, contributing greatly to the wider recognition and affirmation of the school library's role. It also allows a sharper understanding of how well are the mission and objectives set for the school library being accomplished, it helps in the identification of good and wrong practice and of all the negative aspects requiring action. The evaluation of the school library should moreover integrate the wider school self-evaluation process and it must articulate with the school's educational project.

The conception of this self-evaluation model is also the result of previous study and analysis of existing models and more specifically of Portuguese schools, teaching and learning settings. The confrontation of previously practices and the experience of other educational systems were analysed and taken into consideration. Several international studies have already identified the critical success factors for the school library: co-operation and co-ordination levels between teachers and school librarians in what concerns the selection of resources and the development of activities aimed at improving student's achievements; accessibility and service quality; adequate collection and IT resources, etc. (cf., for example, Londsdale, 2003; Lance & Loerstsher, 2003).

In England, the main findings reported by the studies oriented by Dorothy Williams (2001), one for primary age schools and one for secondary level, also clearly indicated what is important for the success of school libraries work: "where evidence of impact on learning was found, the key factors were found to be collection levels, library staffing levels and collaboration between the librarian and teacher". These and other studies demonstrate that school libraries contribute decisively to teaching and learning success and that it is possible to establish a co-relation between the quality of the work developed at the school library and student's performance. The investigation about

quality and evaluation in the field of organizational structures, including libraries, also point out the key concepts that must be present when conducting an evaluation process. Concepts like value, impact and evidence-based practice have supported the way the self-evaluation model was conceived and the next paragraphs introduce the main notions implicated in the model.

The concept of value

The self-evaluation model provides a reference framework for pedagogical regulation and action, offering a set of critical success factors to guide schools in delivering quality and reaching best performance throughout the different domains of school library activity. Value is a transversal concept, understood by the self-evaluation model not as “an inner feature of objects but as something related to experiences and to the benefits we can extract from them. No one will contest that pleasant, well equipped libraries are important, but more important than that is the use we make of them, consistent with its very mission and leading to performance results which meet school’s programmed objectives” (School Libraries Network, 2008).

In fact, value is generated not by the object itself (in this case, the school library), but by the experience within the specific context. The concept of value is present in most contemporary studies about quality and evaluation, and is moreover inherent to good management practices and to continuous improvement cycles: based on the identification of strong and weak points, a new development plan must be forged. This plan, informed by an evidence-based understanding of the school library and the context within which it operates, is paramount to elaborating realistic objectives and priorities.

The concept of impact

Today, the impact of school libraries and the transformational action they bring along to the schools within which they operate is growingly acknowledged. Traditionally, the assessment of this impact was centered in inputs (size of the collection, staff, budget, etc.) and outputs (for example, number of loans, number of visits, number of sessions with students) measurements. This cost-efficiency paradigm has been replaced by a new logic, focused on the impact and benefits of school library's services for its users. Value and interest are now placed in measuring how successful services are and the approach is centered on results as the ultimate outcome of the services school libraries provide. At the end of the day, this shift means moving from assessing service efficiency to assessing service efficacy.

Cram (1999) describes this value-driven process: “libraries have no inherent objective value. Value is (subjectively) assigned and is related to perception of actual or potential benefit. Rather, libraries create value by leveraging intangible assets in such a way as to add value and create benefits. They do not manage value. They manage processes and activities and they make decisions that might lead to production of value to the users of the library and to the parent organization”.

The social context, the wide technological dissemination and the growing economical pressure underscore the need to demonstrate the value of school libraries. Evaluation plays a fundamental role in offering evidence of that value, as a validation exercise, but also as goal setting instrument, aimed at discovering how far we want to go and what the added value of our service is. This role is thus summarized in two fundamental questions: how do school libraries function and deliver their services? and what is their real impact in schools and in students' success?

The concept of evidence-based practice and action-research

The concept of evidence-based practice is operationalized by the systematic collection of evidence related to the daily functioning of a service. The quantity and quality of the evidence collected must inform practice and provide valuable information that answers a specific question or effectively contributes to finding a solution or improving a malfunctioning situation.

Several experts have explored the concept. Ross Todd (2008) applies it to school libraries, considering that they must make a difference in the school they serve, while demonstrating their impact in teaching and learning: "EBP combines professional wisdom, reflective experience, and understanding of students' needs with the judicious use of research-derived evidence to make decisions about how the school library can best meet the instructional goals of the school. In order to accomplish this, school libraries need to systematically collect evidence that shows how their practices impact student achievement; the development of deep knowledge and understanding; and the competencies and skills for thinking, living, and working. [...] A holistic approach to evidence-based practice in school libraries involves three dimensions: evidence for practice, evidence in practice, and evidence of practice".

Great emphasis is placed in determining how processes contribute to the achievement of a larger goal, which should be confirmed by the accomplishment of specific quality-embedded outcomes. Resources and processes are important only in the measure of their added value and contribution to developing teaching and learning. The SLN self-evaluation model is also an example of an action-research process, as it endeavors the establishment of a relationship between processes and the impact or value they generate. Typically, such a process comprehends: (1) identification of a problem; (2) evidence collection; (3) scrutiny, evaluation and interpretation of evidence; (4) knowledge generation to guide future action (Markless and Streffield, 2006, p. 120).

The self-evaluation model: perspectives and purposes

In the organizational context, the literature defines evaluation as a quality seeking process, a way of "systematically assessing effectiveness against a predetermined norm or standard" (Cronin, 1982), a comparison between "what is" and "what out to be for the purpose of exercising judgment" (Van House et al., 1990, p. 3), a systematic reality check, confirming the "extent to which a system (for example a library) has achieved its objectives in a certain period of time". It is also described as a

"systematic process of determining value (in terms of benefit gained) and "quality" (as reflected in customers' satisfaction) of a system. (McKenzie, 1989, p. 156).

These perspectives have oriented the way the structure of the model was conceived. The main intentions were (1) to cover the fundamental dimensions of the school library's activity, as we have already identified; (2) to give concrete guidelines concerning the standards performance expected from SL and (3) to give the possibility and the instruments for a systematic analyses of that activity. Furthermore, the national coverage intended for the model by SLN, demanded the establishment of an instrument tailored to facilitate its implementation by all school libraries in Portugal (except primary schools). The aim was to help school libraries with the required evaluation process (as we said, it became a priority for SLN, regarding the current Portuguese educational settings for schools) and to take this opportunity to give to schools and to school libraries an instrument that could assist them with internal analyses, showing the key aspects that should be taken into consideration.

The final option was for the production of a document for self-evaluation, using performance indicators, but with a significant and large descriptive perspective about the school library work and its connections within the school. This kind of presentation has also a pedagogic purpose because schools and school libraries can identify, in an easier way, what things the SL is already doing and what is still expected to be done. Most Teacher-Librarians (TL) in Portugal would see their role as providing a (good) range of reading material and promoting reading activities (like "story hour") and (less frequently) as providing material to support the curriculum and developing information literacy skills. But how successfully they are able to do this may depend on various things, for instance: the support from headquarters; the status of the TL in the school; the levels of collaboration with other teachers; the amount of money made available for books and electronic resources; the IT infrastructure, etc.

Being a model, the document was also thought to be flexibly adapted according to each school and school library's reality. For instance the school's profile and other circumstances which have a strong impact on the organization and use of the school library should be related in the final self-evaluation report. The intention is to facilitate good management practices and continuous improvement cycles. For this to happen, first of all the self-evaluation process must develop harmoniously within the heart of the school as an organizational structure, with which it interacts. As it is stated by the Model, "schools are to face this process as a self-identified need and not as an externally imposed instrument. The school as whole will benefit from the analysis and resulting reflection. It is expected that the self-evaluation process mobilizes the entire school community and that it can improve the wide range of possibilities offered by the school library", even if ruptures with rooted practices are required (School Libraries Network, 2008).

Those structures or clusters have variable interests and levels of intervention: there is the executive board, which must be included in the assessment development at a very early stage, acting as a process facilitator; but there are also teachers, students, families, tutors and other agents whose participation will be requested. The organic relation of the school library with the school's greater ecology and organizational context determines its success or failure. This process is deeply related to how management structures are able to engage in integrative, collaborative work solutions. If

this practice fails, the opportunity for success is undermined. That is normally the case for schools with a restricted participative culture, little innovativeness, resistance to embrace chance, and lack of staff with a goal-oriented vision.

A good interaction, reflective organic embeddedness of the school library happens when several conditions coexist. One of the most important purposes of the self-evaluation model is to foster the existence of some situations, such as:

- The school library action plan is part of the school's strategic and operational plan and there is an alignment of goals and teaching and learning objectives;
- The teacher librarian is no longer merely seen as an information manager and becomes a key actor with an active role in students' training, curricular development and literacy and digital literacy promotion and advancement;
- Cooperation is reinforced through planning of collaborative activities with the teaching staff of all subjects;
- The teacher librarian is a catalyst for the school's enhanced performance and success;
- The teacher librarian seeks permanent questioning and improvement of management practices and is concerned with how they impact school and students' success;
- The teacher librarian is a leader, able to demonstrate the school library's value, using evidence and exploring continuous communication flows with different school actors and stakeholders (Eisenberg and Miller 2002).

As exposed above, the self-evaluation model is intertwined with the school library's strategic planning and must respond adequately and timely to the school's identity characteristics and objectives. Meaningful decision-making is therefore grounded in the analysis of evidence collected, in a state of permanent dialogue with the school library's internal (structural conditions) and external environments.

The structure of the Model

As have been explained, the self-evaluation model seeks to assess the quality and effectiveness of the school library. The intention was also to try to develop a mainly qualitative approach, focused on processes and outcomes.

The model covers four key themes or domains, divided in sub-domains. As we have already pointed out, the four "domains that have been selected as main topics for analysis represent essential areas to the accomplishment of school libraries mission and its teaching and learning objectives" (School Libraries Network, 2008) within the school. Some of the features are characteristic of the Portuguese reality, but they are all directed towards critical teaching and learning dimensions of school libraries.

A. Supporting Curriculum Development

A.1 Articulating the School Library with the Curriculum, Pedagogic Structures and Teaching Staff

A.2 Developing Information Literacy Skills

B. Promoting Reading and Literacy

C. Projects, Partnerships, Open-ended and Community-oriented Activities

C.1 Supporting Open-ended, Extra-Curriculum and Curriculum-Enrichment Activities

C.2 Projects and Partnerships

D. School Library Management

D.1 Co-operation with the School/ Groups of Schools. Access and Services Provided by the School Library

D.2 Staff, Equipment and Resources for Service Provision

D.3 Collection Management

Each domain/sub-domain is broken down into indicators which address nuclear aspects of its effective functioning. And each indicator is related with a table identifying critical success factors. Critical success factors, as explained in the field of management, are the variables which can add value to a product. These factors are crucial because they identify the areas of activity that need careful and continuous attention by the manager. In the case the school library self-evaluation model, critical success factors show to the teacher librarian, to the headquarters and to the whole school the key actions that contribute in a decisive way for the efficacy and usefulness of the school library. The critical success factors are presented as statements which illustrate what is expected both from the school library and from the school community as many of the situations need the involvement and commitment of the whole school to be accomplished. In this sense, critical success factors are also important since they are a significant support for planning.

For each indicator the model provides potential evidence collection instruments, which will support evaluation. Taking evidence is a fundamental part of the self-evaluation process. It is the data generated by evidence collection which will allow the TL to discover and communicate positive results or to reflect about negative aspects in need of reorganization. Collecting evidence is also looking in particular at the ways in which the school library contributes to the range of learning experiences which the students can access in school.

Data collection is a systematic process, normally taking place continuously during school year and covering all different teaching levels. According to the Model, evidence collected may originate from different sources and gathering a wide range of additional evidence is encouraged in order to evaluate the impact of the school library:

- Policy and strategic planning documents regulating school life and school library's activities (Activity Plan, Rules and Regulations, etc.);
- Meeting logs, records of meetings, views and perceptions about school library-led activities;
- Routine planning documents, schemes of work, lessons plans, promotion materials;
- Statistics and records;
- Work produced by students at the library and in co-operation with the library;
- Data generating instruments specifically designed to collect evidence: observation logs, questionnaires, interviews.

The self-evaluation model provides examples and samples of instruments used to assess the school library. Their use is recommended, in particular to gather targeted information (questionnaires to teaching staff, students and parents; checklists; observation grids) to ensure uniformized procedures of information collection, though adjustments to each particular case are welcome.

After evidence analyses, the TL is in condition to identify the situation of the school library. The Self-evaluation model presents four performance levels (Excellent, Good, Intermediate, Poor) for each domain/sub-domain, which define what the school library is expected to deliver in relation to the subject under scrutiny. The scale serves the purpose of continuous improvement, as school libraries are expected to devise strategies able to position them at higher performance levels. Different levels of the scale are followed by descriptors, which are intended to help to decide which best matches the situation in the school and to show how TL might improve the school library provision and move ahead to the next level.

This phase of the process is important, but as it's said in the Model "it is important to stress that assessment is not an end in itself and that it must be understood as a process leading to reflection, change and concrete action" (School Libraries Network, 2008). In fact, self-evaluation must contribute to devising a new development plan, drawing from the strong and weak points that have been identified. Positive aspects must be emphasize and consolidate and things that have attained poor results must be deeply analyzed. The dissemination of results is also a crucial step, as any improvement measures must be the result of global effort and commitment. The last part of the model offers a template for the final report with the results of the self-evaluation where must also be listed actions for the future.

The elaboration of an action plan is the natural result of the self-evaluation process. First of all it is important to do something with the research results. Action plan must set clear outcomes for actions resulting from research: as we have said, evidence-based practice is a key concept in the Model and it is expected that concrete and genuine actions will be put on scene to ensure continual progression. Within the model's structure, there is also a list with examples of improvement measures, whenever specific needs or debilities pertaining to a specific indicator are detected in the library's performance and call for action.

The implementation of the model

Each year the school decide which of the domains will be evaluated. This selection may depend on school priorities or may be emerged from other specific concern. After a period of four years all domains must have undergone the self-evaluation procedure. This time frame matches every school's management and strategic planning cycle. The procedures concerning the application of the model must be acknowledged as an intrinsic process, internalized within the library's normal activities, practices and routines.

The self-evaluation model for school libraries is now on the second year of an experimental phase. In 2008 about one hundred schools staffed with full-time teachers

have piloted the model. In 2009 more schools (300 participants) are involved in this experimental process and next year the model will be fully applied. Several meetings with teacher librarians and heads of executive boards occurred during the launching phase of the model in different points of the country. Throughout the year, the process was followed-up locally by the School Libraries Network staff based in schools and monitored centrally by the SLN headquarters. In order to ensure the best results and to prevent difficulties concerning the application of the model, SLN develop several online training courses on the self-evaluation model, covering almost all the teacher-librarians involved in the pilot process.

This testing phase is important to understand several aspects implied in the self-evaluation model. Although the reality of schools was taken into account in the conception of the tool, it's essential to know how well the model is matching with school libraries situations and practices. The model must not be understood as a constraint to the school library's articulation with the school. The school's culture is not always favourable to the concept of school library (and also of school) that comes out from the self-evaluation model. The renewed concept of the school library as a hub for innovative and collaborative ways of teaching and learning encompasses new strategies to approach and apprehend knowledge and reality, based on permanent questioning, research and inquiry (inquiry based learning) and some schools have still difficulties to handle with this way of work. So this is one aspect to pay attention in the future.

We also pretend to discover problems that Teacher Librarians could find as well in the application of the model: problems concerning with collecting data, analysing evidence, defining performance profile, etc. Along the year 2008 and 2009, the SLN has implemented a process of collecting information about the difficulties and problems felt by TL. These elements will allow introducing some improvements in the final document, as the model will be generalized in the next school year (2009/2010). At this moment we have already identified some main difficulties, suggesting the adjustments that have to be done in the self-evaluation model and demonstrating a need of formation of the TL on evaluation and research methods. In this last particularly aspect, the Portuguese School Libraries Network has to take measures to surpass this problem.

In addition, the final reports made by Teacher Librarians in 2008 show other troubles that TL were not quite conscious. In fact, we found problems with analyzing, interpreting and deriving weaknesses, strengths or conclusions from data; a reasonable percentage of reports presented vague descriptions instead of evaluative statements; and the identification of the actions for the future where sometimes merely indistinct and unfocused intentions. These are topics that need further work and SLN has already promoted training courses focused on those specifically aspects.

Conclusion

Measuring success is not an end in itself; it is a tool for improvement. This well known statement is already assumed by many schools and school libraries. Despite some predictable initial constraints, the self-evaluation model is mostly referred to as a valuable and helpful instrument. For the first time school libraries have a document that clearly shows the main areas where they have to operate, with examples of actions and their importance. This is fundamental when we know that more important than the place

is what we do inside it and what the results we get with the activity. And some school libraries that are not formally involved in this experimental phase are already using the self-evaluation model as a tool for planning, implementation and assessment of school libraries' activities. It also became evident that teachers in general and, in particular, school's executive boards are now more aware of the pedagogical mission and importance of the school library. We cannot always control what happens around us, but we can influence.

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Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the authors and that the paper was conceived and written by the authors alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others is referenced.