

Learning experiences involving school librarians, teachers, public libraries and parents: a state of the art in Portugal

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In Portugal, schools tend to be a kind of shell where nothing comes in or goes out. And because of that, teachers and school librarians usually don't know much about what other teachers and school librarians are doing. So, it is important to give teachers, school and public librarians and the community in general the possibility of knowing learning experiences, namely successful learning initiatives, what has been achieved, what difficulties had to be faced, how it is possible to innovate. In this research study, which involved 77 school libraries of a specific region in Portugal, I try to show what is being done in what concerns partnerships between school librarians and other teachers, public libraries and parents. It is fair to say that this concern with collaborative work is common to the great majority of school librarians in Portugal, namely since the National Reading Plan was approved in 2006, and some very interesting initiatives are taking place in our school libraries, whose effects upon students are obviously the most important thing in the whole process of establishing partnerships

Learning experiences – Partnerships – School librarians

1. Background

In a global economy, where knowledge plays a crucial role in the economic and social development, the traditional way reading and learning were considered are no longer valid as curricula were conceived as merely instrumental, which means they were based upon theory and abstract knowledge rather than effective use of skills. School is probably the only place where people still believe that the whole is the mere sum of the parts (Pombo, 2004). Developing literacy is thus the way we can provide students with the necessary tools for (i) proficuous social interaction, (ii) adequate linguistic communication, (iii) effective autonomy and personal initiative, (iv) digital competence and (v) lifelong learning capability (Montero Lucena, 2004). Collaborative action involving school librarians, teachers, public libraries and parents is an obvious attempt to improve students' skills in general and their academic outcomes in particular. As Flores et al. (2007:148) put it, "this type of learning [community learning] is more pronounced in communities where teachers have good and trustful relationships with each other (trust orientation) and have regular co-operative relationships and well working routines with other teachers (community orientation)." If this is true among teachers, and the school librarian is a teacher as well, establishing partnerships and above all routines including public libraries and parents can only strengthen the sense of community learning with obvious effects on students.

Over the last 15 years, Portugal has witnessed an important public investment in creating both a school libraries network (Rede de Bibliotecas Escolares, 2008) and a public libraries infrastructure (Direcção-Geral do Livro e das Bibliotecas, 2008). In Portugal, nowadays, we have a public library in every municipality, designed and built according to its population. And as far as public schools are concerned, nearly all schools from basic as well as secondary education are provided with a school library, also designed and built according to the number of students. In what concerns human resources, public libraries can count with the guidance of a librarian and the support of a technical staff adapted to its dimension. As for school libraries, the situation is rather heterogeneous: some school librarians have a full time school librarian, but the majority can only count on a part time school librarian. Besides that, all schools can assign a number of teachers to collaborate between 2 to 8 hours a week with the school librarian. School libraries have no technical staff and the helping staff varies from one to two assistants. Both public libraries and school libraries are fairly equipped in terms of bibliographic and technological resources: there is a regular, though reduced investment in buying books and magazines; computers and access to the Internet are widespread; the access to digital contents is getting more and more common; blogs, Internet sites and interactive activities are provided by many school and public libraries. So, it is fair to say that in Portugal we have the minimum, the necessary conditions to put school libraries and public libraries, librarians and teachers and parents to work together for successful learning.

2. Purpose

Then, the questions we must ask are:

“What is being done in Portugal to promote cooperation involving school libraries, public libraries, teachers and parents?”

What partnerships between school librarians and teachers, public libraries and parents have been made over the last years?

What routines have been made between them?

What initiatives took place from those partnerships?

What effects have these initiatives had on developing successful learning experiences?

3. Methodology

The research was both quantitative and qualitative and it involved the following steps and instruments:

1st phase: consulting school libraries websites in order to analyse in detail their (1) annual activity plans and (2) evaluation reports over the last two years and determine what partnerships have been established with teachers, public libraries and parents;

2nd phase: individual questionnaires applied to all school libraries in a previously chosen region in Portugal

3rd phase: statistic and content analyses of the data recollected;

4th phase: writing the research report;

5th phase: returning the report to all school librarians who responded to the questionnaire, so that they could state their judgement on it.

4. Findings

This research study involved the school libraries in the region of Alentejo (see images 1 and 2), 77 in all, from the 2nd and 3rd grade and secondary schools.

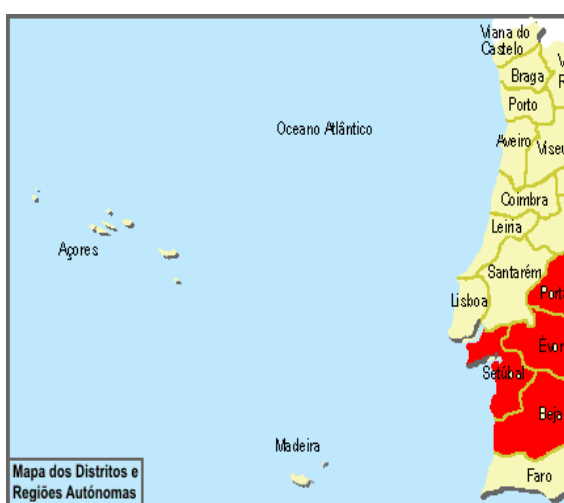


Image 1 – The region of Alentejo (in red)

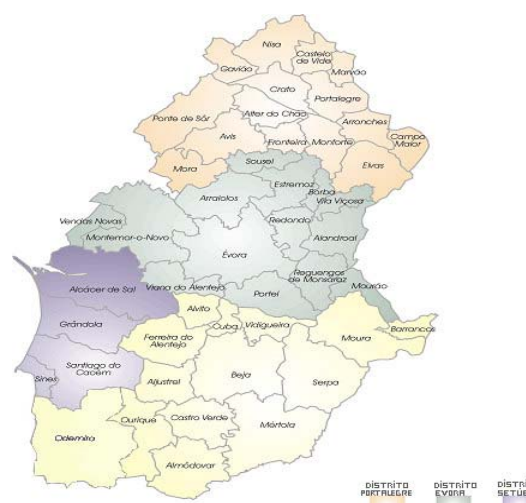


Image 2 – Districts and municipalities in Alentejo

I began the study by consulting schools and school libraries web sites in order to get to know their annual activity plans and evaluation reports over the last two years. I wanted to determine what partnerships had been established with teachers, public libraries and parents to promote reading and how those partnerships were evaluated by school librarians.

Simultaneously, I applied an individual questionnaire which aimed to know:

Number of part-time and full-time school librarians;

Their experience as school librarians;

Who helped them in their school libraries;

Which partnerships they had established with other teachers, parents and public librarians.

The questionnaire was answered by 35 school librarians, which correspond to a reply rate of 45% as we can see in image 3.

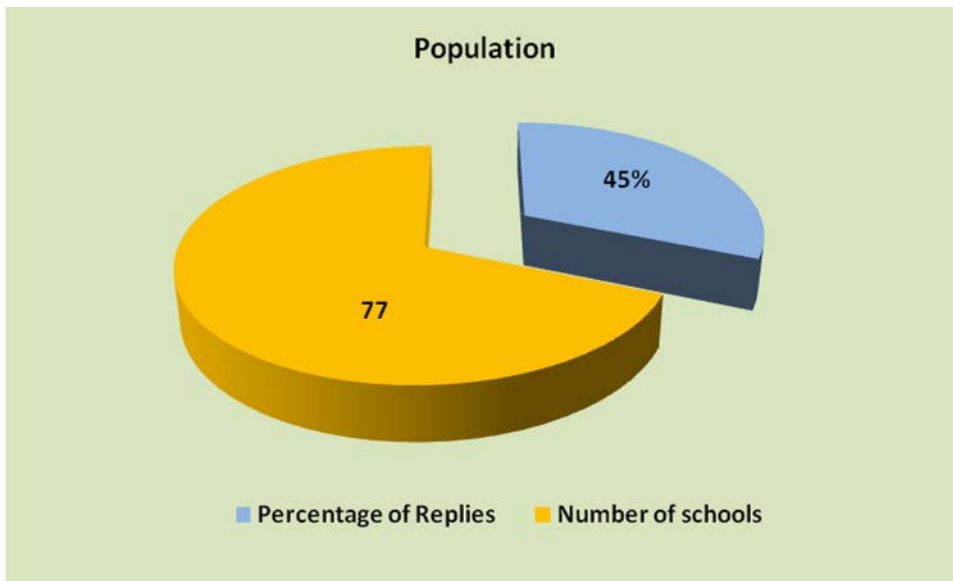


Image 3 – Number of schools and percentage of replies

Most of the librarians were full time school libraries. For every part time school librarian, there were two full time school librarians.

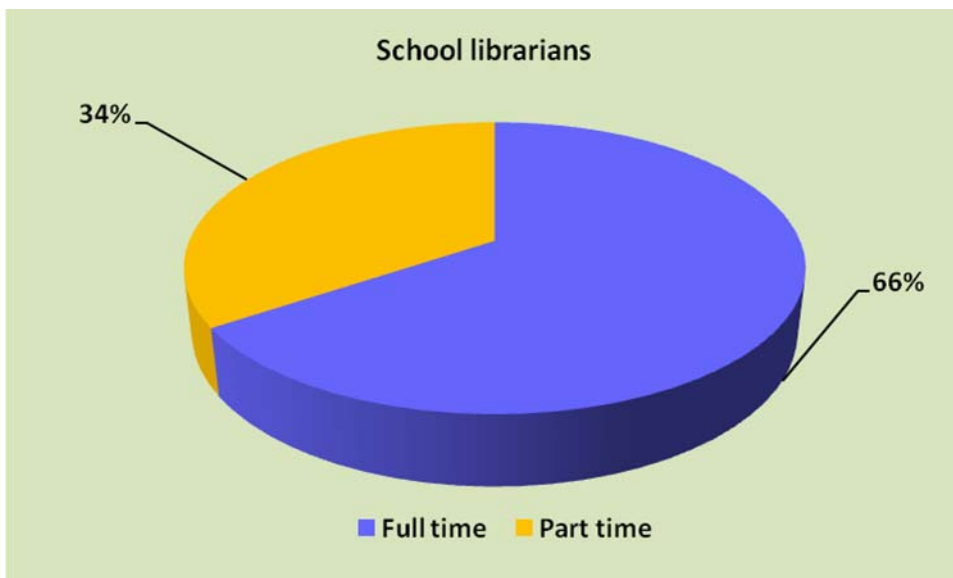


Image 4 – School librarians' working hours

As far as school librarians' experience was concerned, the average was 3,7 years, although 2 years was the most common number of years of experience in the school library.

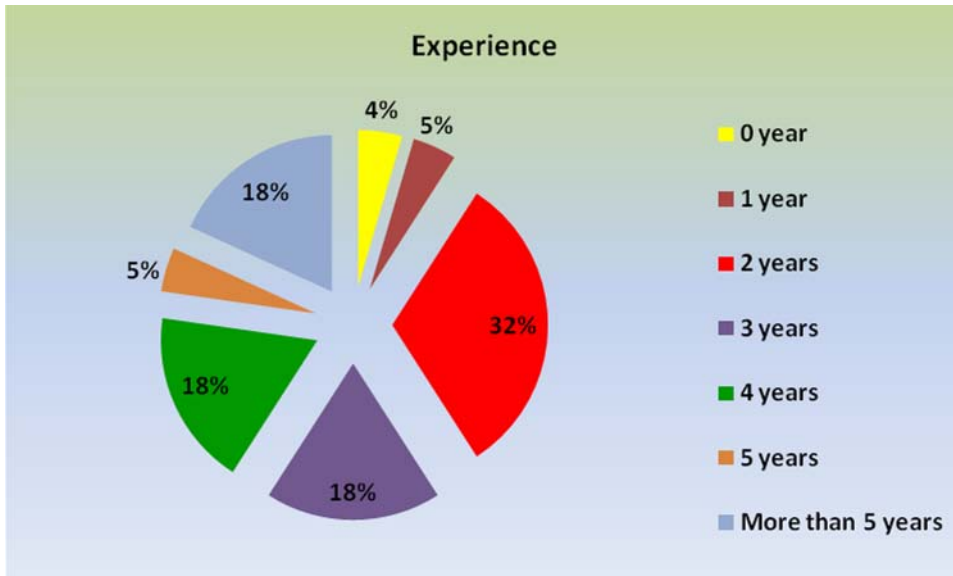


Image 5 – School librarians’ experience

As for the teachers who help the school librarian, in Portugal we can find two situations. The first is the Pedagogical Team and the great majority of the inquired schools followed the legal orientations which indicate it should be formed by 4 teachers of different areas of knowledge, as we can see in image 6.

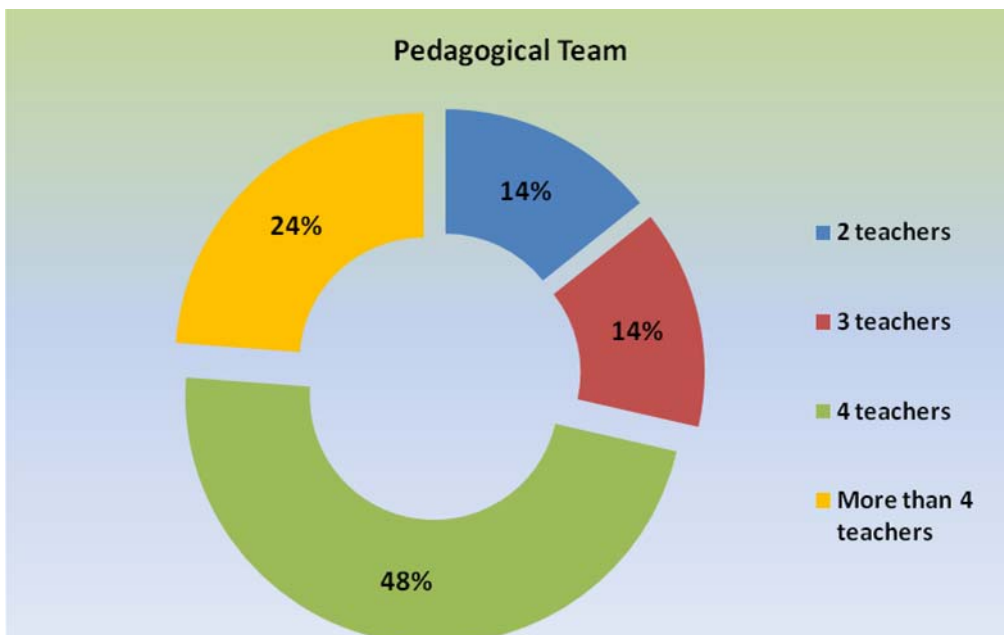


Image 6 – School libraries pedagogical teams

Most of the teachers in the school library pedagogical team teach Portuguese, French or English (following a long tradition in Portugal, where school libraries were traditionally

assigned to language teachers), but we can find a significant number of teachers of Sciences and History.

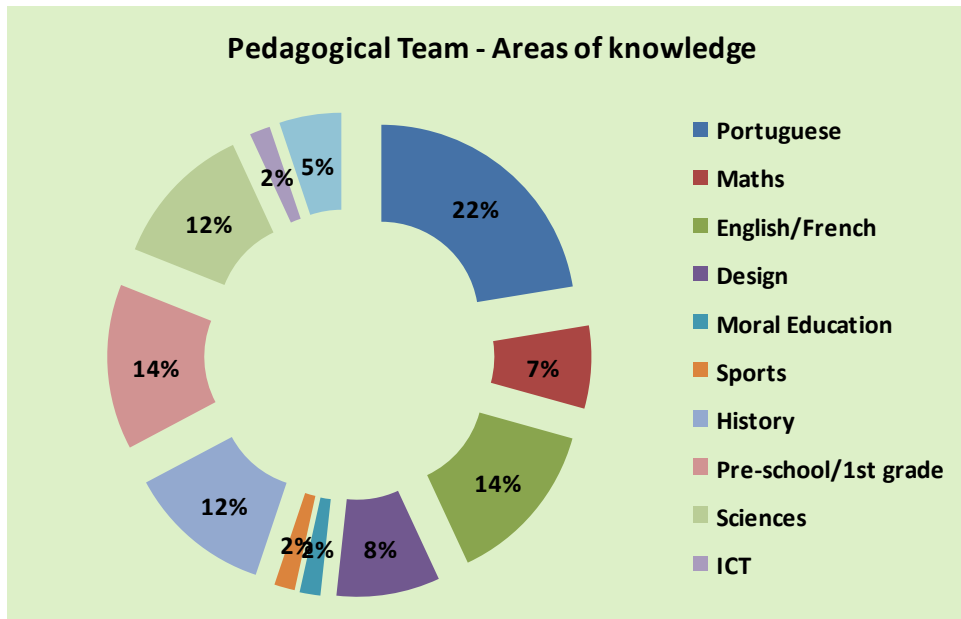


Image 7 – School libraries pedagogical teams

The second situation concerns the collaborating teachers and here we do not have any limitations. All teachers who want to collaborate with the school library can do that as long as they want to, have some kind of expertise (reading, ICT, arts, technical knowledge) and they are allowed by the principal. As we can see in image 8, we have a paradoxical situation: while 25% of the school libraries have more than 4 teachers collaborating with the school librarian, 40% of them don't have a formal collaborating team, which doesn't mean, however, that teachers don't collaborate with the school library at all. But it does mean that teachers don't collaborate with the school librarian on a regular basis.

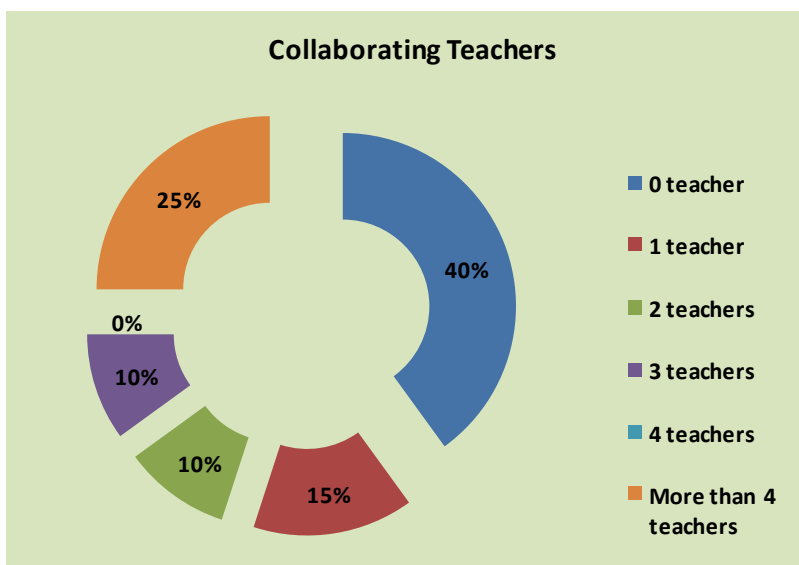


Image 8 – School libraries collaborating teachers

Teachers who collaborate with the school library are from different areas of knowledge, but it is significant that the majority teaches Design and History (23%). This fact indicates the concern school librarians have with the cultural and aesthetic work of their libraries. The percentage of teachers of Portuguese (19%) and Sciences (15%) also attests their concern with reading and literacy. However, the lack of ICT teachers both in the pedagogical teams and among the collaborating teachers makes it very clear that school libraries still have a long way to go as far as Information and Communication Technologies are concerned. As I was trying to access school libraries web sites during the first phase of this research study, I came to the conclusion that not only many of them didn't have a web site at all, but also that those that maintained some kind of visibility through the Internet, the information they provided was extremely poor. In many cases I could not access their annual activities plans, the name of the school librarian, the opening and closing hours and, the least of all, if they had any kind of partnership with teachers, parents or the public library. Most of them had blogs where school librarians tried to give their school libraries some visibility outside the schools with some information and pictures related to the activities that had taken place.

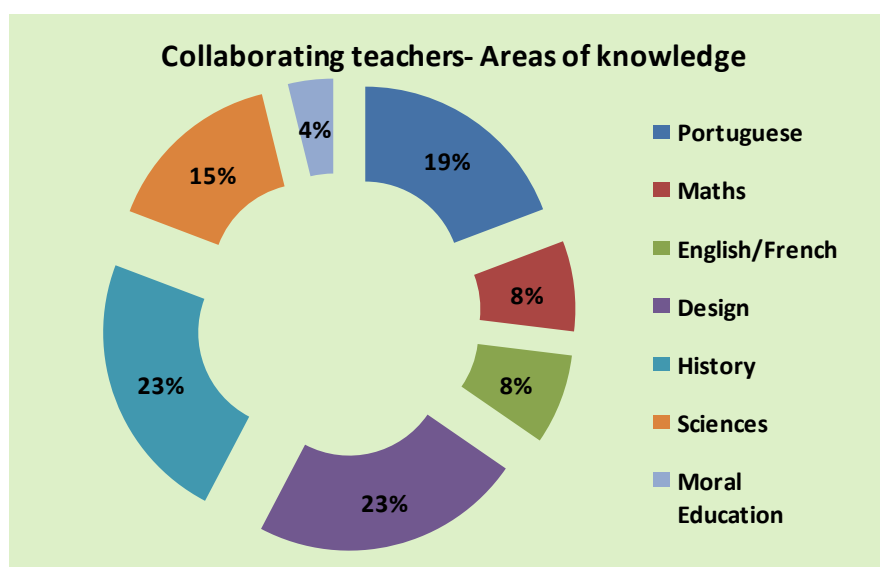


Image 9 – School libraries collaborating teachers

The main source to know what partnerships have been made between school libraries and teachers, parents and public libraries were, in fact, the inquiry addressed to the school librarians and both their annual activity plans and their evaluation reports over the last two years. As we can see in image 7, partnerships with the school libraries involve teachers and school departments, public libraries, other school libraries, parents, local companies and other institutions.

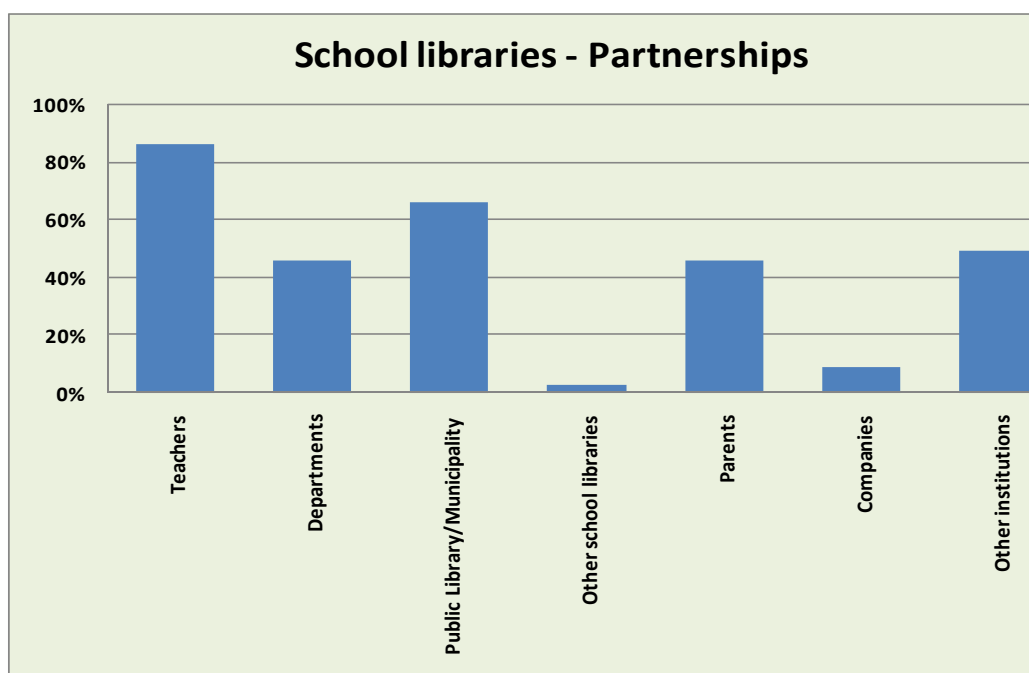


Image 10 – School libraries partnerships

As far as teachers are concerned, it is significant that 86% of the inquired schools libraries stated they had established some kind of partnership with them. The kind of work they do together is rather diversified and it takes place with teachers of Portuguese, Sciences, French and English. With the teachers of Portuguese, it usually involves celebrating some special day or occasion (School Libraries International Day, Poetry International Day...), promoting reading (reading and writing contests, meetings with writers and illustrators...), reading in the classroom and organising book's fairs. With the teachers of Sciences, partnerships are usually related to information literacy and organising scientific exhibitions. With teachers of French and English, the most common partnerships are celebrating special dates (Halloween, Saint Valentain...).

The connection between the school librarian and school departments usually implies two main domains: the National Reading Plan, which was approved in Portugal in 2006, and organising exhibitions in the school library related to photography, the European Union, Science and historical events. Some school librarians also collaborate regularly with the school newspaper where they try to give some visibility to what is going on in their school libraries.

Outside the school, the percentage of partnerships established with the public library (66%) is very significant and it involves a wide range of activities: the National Reading Contest, reading activities especially with pre-school and first grade students, exhibitions, meetings with writers, book's fairs, cultural events, resources' exchange and technical support.

The partnerships between school libraries and parents are getting more and more attention both from schools in general and school libraries in particular and almost half of the inquired school librarians (46%) remarked that fact. This relationship takes place almost exclusively because of the National Reading Plan since reading in the family is one of its most relevant domains. It involves parents during the Reading Week and the National Reading Contest in very interesting activities: “Reading side by side”, “Reading hour in the family”, “Reading marathon”, “Reading with you” or “Reading with the family”.

There are also a great number of partnerships between school libraries and other institutions, proving that school libraries can be rather creative when it comes to promote reading. Among the inquired school libraries, in almost half of them (49%) we could find regular relationships with local newspapers and local radios, theatre companies, museums, homes for the aged and cultural associations and foundations. 9% of the inquired school librarians also reported some kind of partnerships with local companies, such as supermarkets, co-operative societies and publishing companies, namely in organising book’s fairs and cultural events.

Finally, where school librarians most fail is in establishing partnerships is with other school libraries. In fact, only 3% of the inquired school librarians reported some regular relationship with other school libraries and, in this case, it involved 2nd and 3rd grade schools with pre-school and 1st grade schools in reading activities.

5. Some conclusions

Preliminary findings indicated that a very significant number of school librarians in Portugal consider that involving teachers, public libraries and parents in promoting reading and literacy is a line of action that should be followed in every school and it is a major challenge they face every year.

As far as parents are considered, their involvement in cooperative activities with school librarians and teachers are getting more and more common but school librarians fully recognise that they occur mainly with younger students. As students grow older, parents tend to be less receptive to participate in schools’ activities. Nonetheless, there emerged some very interesting experiences which prove that parents can make a valid contribution for successful learning.

Inside the schools, partnerships between school librarians and teachers, individually or as members of a school department, are a regular practice and much is being done in promoting reading and literacy, namely because of the National Reading Plan. However, every school librarian emphasized the problems he/she has to deal with when he/she tries to work together with classroom teachers because their schedule is so full and they have so many things to do that they just don’t have time to collaborate with the school library the way they feel appropriate. School librarians face the same problem when they try to involve parents and families because activities usually take place at their working hours.

Partnerships between school and public libraries are getting more and more significant, but it is still a fact that many public libraries, namely in small communities, don't have the necessary human resources to fulfil the task of collaborating with the school library. In these cases, their contribution is mainly technical support, especially with 1st grade school libraries.

Partnerships between school libraries and a wide range of local institutions and companies is clearly an increase in value because they are a creative way of getting resources, mixing the school library with the community and giving visibility to the things teachers and students do for reading and literacy.

Finally, the reasons why so few school librarians establish partnerships with other school libraries are to be found in three main facts: tradition, time and distance. In other words, traditionally schools have always seen themselves as some kind of islands where nothing comes in and nothing goes out. To change this status quo requires time and determination. Most of the inquired libraries are situated in isolated schools and distance is indeed an inhibition of personal contact and personal commitment, both being essential to work collaboratively. So, it will take some time until school librarians can share resources, strategies and know-how with each other.

Generally speaking, school librarians evaluate both the partnerships they established and the impacts on students learning as very positive. Nonetheless, they are fully aware that working together with other teachers, public librarians and parents is a way, not an end in itself. This means that they know that the effects of their actions upon students are the most important thing in the whole process of establishing partnerships. On the other hand, school librarians made it very clear that what they have achieved so far is but the beginning of a long, hard and very demanding process.

6. Importance and interest

In Portugal, schools tend to be a kind of shell where nothing comes in or goes out. And because of that, teachers and school librarians usually don't know much about what other teachers and school librarians are doing. So, it is important to give teachers, school and public librarians and the community in general the possibility of knowing learning experiences, namely successful learning initiatives, what has been achieved, what difficulties had to be faced, how it is possible to innovate.

Furthermore, making this research available to teachers, parents and the community in general can make a small contribution to changing the traditional image many people still have about school libraries, thus making them more able to fulfil their role as learning centres. To be a learning centre, according to Durban e García (2008, p. 64), means that the school library must teach students "to use a resource that helps them to access new knowledge, new learning experiences and create intellectual skills such as reading, essential for life long learning".

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Biographical Notes

Artur Dagge is a teacher (since 1987) and a school librarian (since 1994) and his research interests are in reading, literacy and teachers' training.

Statement of Originality

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