

School libraries dynamics: crossing borders inside and outside the country

A Dinâmica das Bibliotecas Escolares: Vencendo Fronteiras Dentro e Fora do País

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Abstract

How can a school library shorten the distance between institutions, professionals, students and teaching methods? How can a Teacher Librarian and a School Libraries Inter-district Coordinator cooperate to conceptualize new strategies, expand students' learning experiences and reinforcing their involvement with the school library? How important is it for students to engage in different reading activities with partners from other European countries? How can a "Reading Plus Project" evolve to a "National Merit Idea Project" and to a "Comenius Project", where the role of the school library as an open door to intercultural competences is emphasized? How can we take advantage of the new technologies to modernize the school library and promote digital literacy? With this paper we aim to give an example of good practices in school libraries in Portugal, hopefully giving inspiration to others to overcome barriers inside and outside their country.

Keywords: School Libraries, Reading Plus, Comenius, ICT, Portugal

Abstract in Portuguese

Como pode uma biblioteca escolar encurtar a distância entre instituições, profissionais, alunos e métodos de ensino? Como é que uma Professora Bibliotecária e uma Coordenadora Interconcelhia da Rede de Bibliotecas Escolares conseguem cooperar no sentido de conceptualizarem novas estratégias, expandindo as experiências de aprendizagem dos alunos e reforçando o seu envolvimento com a biblioteca escolar? De que importância se

reveste para os alunos a participação em diferentes atividades de leitura com colegas de outros países europeus? Como pode um “Projeto aLer+” evoluir para um “Projeto Ideias com Mérito” e, finalmente, para um “Projeto Comenius”, em que o papel da biblioteca escolar enquanto porta aberta para as competências interculturais surge enfatizado? Como se pode tirar partido das novas tecnologias para modernizar a biblioteca escolar e promover a literacia digital? Com esta comunicação, pretendemos facultar um exemplo de boas práticas nas bibliotecas escolares portuguesas, esperando inspirar outros a ultrapassar as barreiras dentro e fora do seu país.

Palavras-chave: Bibliotecas Escolares, aLer+, Comenius, TIC

Starting point

A library is not a sarcophagus of dead thoughts, but a lab of living Science.

Raúl Proença⁵, 1918

All projects have a story of their own and this one is not an exception to the rule. It is a story of experimenting, challenging limits, crossing borders in a physical and psychological way. It is also a scream or call for attention from a little, but highly organized and hardworking school community, situated in a rural area in the center of Portugal. Cláudia Mota is the only Teacher Librarian who works there and she never gives up the fight to achieve new goals. Agrupamento de Escolas de Colmeias is a group of eighteen schools, namely a Comprehensive School (which includes about 370 students), eight Primary Schools and nine Kindergartens. Altogether, 896 students attend this group of schools, split over an area of about 20 kilometers, at almost middle distance between the two biggest cities in Portugal, Lisbon and Oporto.

In Portuguese, “Colmeias” (the name of this joint group of schools) means “beehives”, the “man-made homes for bees”. In a strong sense, this image symbolizes the internal dynamics of the school staff. It is formed by a group of about 60 teachers who nourish a great sense of cooperation and frequently reflect on their praxis. Thus, they are able to take advantage of the individuality of each member to strengthen the sense of shared effort. In other words, day by day they get involved in a common mission: preparing their students for a competitive and highly demanding society, where the values of responsibility, discipline and solidarity cannot be forgotten.

Within this particular community, what is the role of the single Teacher Librarian, responsible for running two school libraries and coordinating the work of a little, but highly motivated team? It’s definitely not an easy job, but it is also a highly rewarding experience, because in Colmeias the school library is, in fact, faced as a nuclear part of the school and of the students’ learning process. Engaging in new projects has been the solution found to give these school libraries a new impetus of modernization, renovation and reconceptualization:

⁵ Raúl Proença was a well-known Director of the Portuguese National Library.

La biblioteca debe ser un agente catalizador e canalizador de acciones concretas que sin apoyo estable y continuado non podrían fructificar. [...] debe aglutinar como un imán, demandas y necesidades concretas surgidas en las distintas áreas curriculares.[...] Este imán puede y debe, a su vez, iluminar y canalizar, por caminos de corresponsabilidad e interdisciplinariedad, las demandas recibidas, vinculando las herramientas y recursos – tradicionales y digitales – más útiles para su realización, y asesorando en el diseño de propuestas concretas. (Roca, 2010, p. 97)

To make it clear, it must be said that each Teacher Librarian in Portugal not only supports the students and teachers who have the school library nearby, but also those who study and work in the other schools belonging to the same educational unit. He/She teaches one class (between three to six hours per week) and is responsible for the activities developed in the school library(ies) and its/their management. He/she helps with the customer service, controls the budget of the school library, promotes the curriculum articulation and engages on projects inside and outside the school.

The Road Ahead⁶

The first part of the road

Once the background is clear, let's tell the story. Up to the present moment, a long way has gone by. Colmeias was one of the pioneer schools/groups of schools, chosen by the Portuguese School Libraries Network — the governmental entity responsible for the functioning of school librarianship in Portugal and its philosophy — to embrace the so-called “Reading Plus Project” in 2008. This national initiative was based on the “Reading Connects Project”, implemented in the United Kingdom⁷. The general aim of the project was, and still is, to build a strong community of readers within the school, involving students, teachers, parents, the school/local administration and so on.

By that time, a local “Reading Plus team” was created in Colmeias and its members decided to link the reading activities to other cultural/thematic topics, so that it would be easier for students to cooperate and feel motivated, especially those who didn't particularly enjoy books. For two school years many activities joined Reading with Music and, later on, a connection between Reading and Art was established and emphasized.

To keep its dynamics, Colmeias “Reading Plus Project” had to be reinvented and conceptualized from time to time until now. All kinds of activities were implemented and experienced, especially the famous “Reading Assaults”, which were later adopted in other schools throughout the country. What characterized the “Reading Assaults”? The intervenient students and teachers came by surprise to a certain classroom, to the library, to the Headmaster's office or to the local institutions, promoting musical and reading moments. Those short moments were carefully prepared to create some magic in the air. Then, they left by surprise as well. Later on, these events were expanded and became an opportunity for students from a specific class to present their work to colleagues attending another class in the same school or in a nearby school.

⁶ This heading was inspired by the title of Bill Gates's book, precisely named *The Road Ahead* (1995).

⁷ For further details, check http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/resources/practical_resources_info/358_archive_resource-reading_connects_primary_school_handbook

From 2013 to 2015, the emphasis was put on the creation of new reading experiences, by using iPads and eBooks, as well as exploring other types of functional reading formats, such as iPad applications, QR codes and other digital resources.

Next step: a National Merit Idea Project and the perspective of a Comenius Project

Since 2013, Colmeias “Reading Plus Project” evolved to a “National Merit Idea Project”, financially supported by the Portuguese School Libraries Network, giving it a new impetus. It also got finally linked to a “Comenius Project”, where the role of the school library as an open door to intercultural competences (SLODIC) is emphasized. How did this happen?

The Portuguese and Danish Comenius partners first met in the SLAMIT V (an European Grundtvig Course for School Librarians) in Ireland, in 2012, and decided to take the challenge of developing a joint work involving school libraries in a growing digital context. It was also in Ireland that Cláudia Mota (Teacher Librarian) and Margarida Chaves (School Libraries Inter-district Coordinator) first met. Then, they invited potential partners from other countries and met in a Preparatory Comenius Visit in Herlev, Copenhagen. There, they learnt how to use QR codes for pedagogical purposes and established a new common road to emphasize the role of the school library within their school communities.

Ready for new challenges, the Portuguese Teacher Librarian also prepared the application for a “National Merit Idea Project”, supported by the Portuguese School Libraries Network. This help from the national governmental institution allowed the local team to better structure the activities and get some financial support to buy iPads, eBooks and other technological resources.

In the meantime, the Comenius project was approved and all areas of intervention joined like pieces of the same puzzle. The School Library and the “Reading Plus” team finally had all the necessary logistic conditions to develop innovative ideas, which would influence the learning process of the Portuguese Comenius class in particular and, hopefully, focus its attention on new reading activities and methods.

Embracing SLODIC

SLODIC is the name of the Comenius project in question, meaning “School Libraries: Open Doors to Intercultural Competences”. Besides the arguments stated above, why is it important to engage in an European Project? The answer is clear. It is extremely useful for students’ present and future lives to develop new reading activities, keeping simultaneously in touch with partners from other European countries. It’s like opening a highway for them to use and explore. In the surveys and questionnaires carried out at the beginning and at this last phase of the project (the Comenius project is going to end in June 2015), most of the involved students recognized it was a privilege to participate in such an experience⁸.

The project also aims at: making the school library an open door to cultural diversity and empathy; reinforcing students’ English knowledge by using ICT tools; learning to find and understand the ‘ethos’ of ourselves and of the others (within the perspective of an holistic education), by allowing students to meet and make new friends; making students aware of

⁸ To get further information about the project and its evaluation, please check its homepage, in <https://slodic.wordpress.com/>.

the cultural realities in Europe and around the world; learning to be tolerant by understanding and respecting people's background; and improving language competence in a real life context.

The last, but not less significant, purpose of SLODIC is to prepare students for future labor market needs. Thus, the project had a fundamental European added value from the beginning, which the partners have seen positively confirmed through the development of the proposed common activities. Students have definitely been using a foreign language, English, and the new technologies as important means/resources for universal communication. In fact:

Raising the language competences of children, young people and adults will foster the mobility of workers and students and improve the employability of the European workforce. Therefore, improved language competences will contribute to achieving the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy of growth and jobs. (European Union, 2012, p. 1)

Increasing internationalization and globalization have changed the way students meet the surrounding world and the school has to take that reality into account. In the light of the gradual transformation of the European countries into multicultural societies, it has become necessary to help students to develop a wider cultural understanding. Thus, they get better qualifications to cope with the globalized world of which they are a part.

To sum up, the SLODIC project pretended to develop some basic/core competences set by the European Union (European Union, 2005): communicating in a foreign language; improving digital competences; getting to know interpersonal and civic abilities and recognizing the cultural expression.

In order to achieve these objectives, all the teachers involved in SLODIC first met in Portugal to thoroughly define the procedures and steps of the project. Then, students and teachers undertook different activities — with the school library as a mediating platform — to cover everyday life in the participating countries, seen through the eyes of young people. They focused on students aged 12 to 16 and decided to divide the project into two parts. In the first year, the focus was on the pedagogical use of QR codes, starting with a set of QR codes about the Christmas traditions of each country. These were shared and an exhibition with all the codes was prepared in each school library. The second task was the thorough analysis of the film “Bend It Like Beckham” and the conception/creation of short films about friendship (when the mobility to Iceland took place). Through these media, students examined and promoted similarities and differences within their countries.

In the second year they prepared a marketplace, which took place in the Czech Republic, where students from the different countries had the possibility to meet other youngsters, get to know more about the represented cities and landscapes, and share ideas/information/experiences. Finally they studied a short story, prepared some outcomes about it and focused on running a multicultural campaign. They created a logo for this campaign and interviewed colleagues who were born (or had lived part of their lives) abroad. The second part of the campaign took place in Denmark, where students made different contributions that, in many ways, tell about the benefits of multicultural connections.

The cooperation between a Teacher Librarian and a School Libraries Inter-district Coordinator

The next aim of this paper is to show how professionals working for the central institutions, like the Portuguese School Libraries Network, can articulate their work with those who are working in the field, that is, directly with the students. The case of Cláudia Mota and Margarida Chaves is even more interesting because they work in two different geographical areas. What could be felt as a difficulty eventually reinforced the working links and broadened the dimension of their experience. Sometimes in person and mainly through online contact, they were able to rethink the praxis and give it a theoretical support based on their experience. They were not alone in this task, because they could always count with the help of the other “Reading Plus” team members, namely Bernardete Francisco (Portuguese and French teacher), Francisco Mendes (Physical Education teacher) and Rosário Madeira (Portuguese teacher and a member of Colmeias Headmaster’s team). It must be said that the support of those who run the school is also fundamental for such projects to evolve, assuring conditions for the action to take place.

As no other country, besides Portugal, has Inter-district coordinators, the different delegations agreed that Margarida Chaves should participate in the project because she was linked to it from the start and due to her expertise in connecting Teachers Librarians and their schools projects; projects of schools and the goals of Public Libraries and City Councils (with their Local Educative Project) and gathering information on institutions that could add value to the school projects themselves. One thing is clear: as educative competences are set according to a specific social context, it is the society we’re living in that sets the goals to achieve. However, we also have to consider the transversal competences that run across the curriculum and that belong to all subjects. So, in many ways, education becomes a synonym of socialization ((López & González, 2008, p. 91).

What's the role of the Inter-district Coordinators? They connect different people and help establishing links between institutions. They are also information curators and organize field trips, so that the Teacher Librarians can replicate the recently acquired experience in their own educative community. They contact specialists, writers and public personalities, in order to help the Teacher Librarians in the organization of short events or brief training sessions, either for students or for teachers. Being part of the National School Libraries Network, they have facility in promoting cooperative environments.

Because it was not her first experience as far as an international project involving school libraries is concerned, Margarida Chaves was able to keep a critical look, simultaneously internal and external. This was very significant to monitoring and evaluating the project itself. Her goal was also to learn from the experience, in order to help other Teacher Librarians to shape — and engaged in — new international projects, which may put the emphasis on the school library as a vital element of the Pedagogical and Educational School Project. Margarida also had a significant role in the dissemination of this project among the fifty one Teacher Librarians that she has been coaching in seven municipalities. Thus, she motivated other teachers to follow this particular example of initiative and organized professional presentations for her colleagues in regular meetings. The participation in the IASL conference is also part of the dissemination process.

A few teacher librarians that are coached by Margarida Chaves are already implementing some of the pedagogical practices experienced in SLODIC. These are meant to fulfil the strategic advocacy framework of the School Library Network Program 2014-2020 in general, and some of its guidelines in particular⁹. According to this document, School Libraries are:

1. Places of knowledge and innovation, able to incorporate new pedagogical practices; [...]
 3. Teaching places for developing the reading competence, which is the core to access all kinds of knowledge; [...]
 5. Crucial teaching fields to learn all digital, media and information literacies; [...]
 10. Sustainable dynamic networks, with consistent practices within the community. [...]
- (PORTUGAL. Ministério da Educação e Ciência, 2013, pp. 9-10)

Exploring new ICT tools and resources

How can someone take advantage of the new technologies and electronic tools/resources (iPads, QR codes, wordclouds, and so on) to modernize the school library and promote digital literacy? Due to this intertwining of projects, the ICT equipment of Colmeias School Library improved. Now there are 8 computers, 2 printers, fourteen iPads and an acceptable (although slow) wireless internet connection available. The iPads can be individually used in the school library (for educational or recreative purposes), in the classroom or at home, both by the teachers and students/families, as long as the regulation topics are strictly followed. Besides, the most relevant activities which take place at school are now shown on a TV screen placed in one of the main halls, following the purposes of dissemination of the school library dynamics.

Thanks to the Comenius project activities and the National Merit Project, many ICT tools or resources have been used, such as google docs, wordclouds, storyboard, prezi, edmodo, delivr, i-nigma, and so on. Some eBooks have been also read and many iPad applications have been tested, for instance: socrative, kahoot, geogebra, storybird, makebeliefscomics, etc.

Establishing further links

The desirable articulation with the University Libraries personnel and Public Libraries professionals (who belong to the City Council staff) can also be promoted by these innovative projects, which give a lot of work and sacrifice, but also pleasure, to take into one's own hands. Other regional and national contacts naturally follow.

When the Comenius partners came to Portugal, the organization committee (actually the "Reading Plus" team, coordinated by Cláudia Mota) addressed some of the local authorities, in order to prepare interesting activities. They also came in touch with some touristic institutions and the staff of the local university, named Instituto Politécnico de Leiria (IPL), where one of the working days took place. These initiatives gradually create a net of contacts that allows different institutions to get closer and to pursue common objectives. The "Reading Plus" team has also been invited to present its work (orally or by preparing a poster) in different local and national events, both at other schools and universities. This motivates the team to go further, but also promotes the image of the school internally and externally.

⁹ This quotation was translated from Portuguese to English by the authors of this paper themselves.

On the other hand, some teachers coached by Margarida Chaves are implementing some of the SLODIC pedagogical practices. They actually established a partnership with the librarians from the Technological Department of Universidade Nova (in Costa da Caparica). These librarians have planned sessions for teachers from all grades, especially for those working with secondary students, as they will soon become college students. The aim is to harmonize /create standard procedures related to: best internet resources and their evaluation; ethics in education/information research; models for bibliography, quotations and references when writing a school paper. They help other teachers to understand the importance of teaching/learning Literacy from an early school age.

In Portugal, Teacher Librarians, University Librarians and the Public Libraries staff members join efforts to do a better job and organize common literary or cultural events in their area of intervention. All of them want to keep up-to-date knowledge of the school system as far as literacy skills are concerned, so that each professional can serve his/her public in the best possible way. So, it's not too much to say that Portuguese Librarians are really working together, keeping in mind a common intention: to teach Literacy to all kinds of audiences.

Conclusion: always moving ahead

This story is not finished: there are still new ways to follow, new roads to cross, new bridges to build. When people engage in experiences like these, they always dream to go further, to cross (even more) borders and put their professional and personal limits to the test. This article and the participation in the IASL conference 2015 are just two more steps ahead.

Therefore, this is a *work-in-progress* initiative which represents, not only the effort of the authors of this article, but also the decisive collaboration from other colleagues. Hopefully, they will give inspiration to others to follow their example, adapting the described experience to new realities, school systems and cultural horizons.

One last point is clear: projects like these will definitely make the school library *rock*. They will also strengthen the role of the school library as a *rock* — in the sense of a nuclear and steady part — of the school and of society.

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Biographical notes

Cláudia Mota is an English Teacher since 1995 and a Teacher Librarian since 2006 at the Agrupamento de Escolas de Colmeias, Leiria, Portugal. Coordinator of a “Reading Plus Project” since 2008 and a “Comenius Project” since 2013. She graduated in Modern Languages and Literatures (English/German) - University of Coimbra (UC), has a Master in English Studies (UC) and three Post-graduation courses: Translation Studies (English/German) (UC); Animation of Libraries (ESEPF); Management of School Libraries and Reading Promotion (Open University-Portugal). She is preparing her PHD Thesis in Comparative Literature, linking it to Creative Writing and Children’s Literature (UC).

Margarida Chaves is a Language and Literature Portuguese Teacher since 1984, and a former Teacher Librarian at Fernão Mendes Pinto High School, Almada, Portugal. Inter-district Coordinator for the School Library Network since 2007. She graduated in Modern Languages and Literatures (Portuguese/English) – University of Lisboa, has a Master in Documentation, Universidad Alcalá, Madrid, and has two Post-graduation courses: Evaluation in Education (UL) and Documental Sciences (ULHT).