

Collaborative teaching, reading and literacy

Promoting reading and literacy: one's too short, two is good, three is even better

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In Portugal, students read very little and a significant part of them has great difficulties in dealing with written information. The national and international student assessments regularly situate Portugal at the lowest levels of students' performances. This means that in Portugal everything is still to be done in what concerns reading and literacy. The problem doesn't have an easy answer but two of the main reasons are in the poor investment in school libraries and the absence of collaborative teaching. In fighting illiteracy and promoting reading habits, school libraries should take the lead and try to evolve three distinct groups: teachers, students and families. Organising regular reading sessions with students and parents, making books and reading a constant presence in the classroom and at home, using e-technologies to promote reading and writing or publishing a school newspaper are only some examples of what school libraries, teachers, students and families can do together in order to develop literacy and reading in Portugal.

Reading and literacy: is there a plan in Portugal?

In Portugal, students (and the whole population in general) read very little¹ and a significant part of them has great difficulties in dealing with written information. The national and international student assessments are very clear and they all agree in placing Portugal at the lowest levels of students' performances². This means that in Portugal almost everything is still to be done in what concerns reading and literacy.

However, every teacher in Portugal will obviously agree that one of the most important tasks our educational system must carry through is promoting both reading and the ability to use critically the informational resources that are at the students' disposal. And information keeps growing, making this task more difficult every day.

¹ In 2004, only 46% of the population aged between 15 and 64 read books; 63% had less than 100 books at home (*Estudo de hábitos de leitura e compra de livros* in <http://www.apel.pt/cmgestao/include/imagedisp.asp?id=219&save=1>)

² Around 50% of Portuguese students were placed below level 3 both in PISA 2000 and PISA 2003

And yet, this does not mean that we are doing anything concrete. In Portugal, promoting reading and literacy is still a virtual reality because, generally speaking, it has been done without global planning and systematic and methodological application or collaborative teaching involving teachers, school librarians and school libraries, librarians and public libraries, families. This is probably the only way of improving both the poor results of Portuguese students in the national and international literacy tests and the high rates of school failure, providing them with the necessary tools to access, evaluate and use efficiently the information disposed in a wide range of supports. It has been a common practice in Portugal to leave all issues concerning reading and, more recently, literacy to a specific group of teachers as if learning was the mere sum of knowledge of distinct scientific areas completely apart. In other words, teachers of Portuguese have been exclusively responsible for creating reading habits among students and the knowledge they will have of their mother tongue, thus developing their literacy abilities.

The legal documents that regulate the curricula of basic education in Portugal do not contribute to change this situation because they do not refer either to the reading or the literacy abilities students should achieve. The only reference we can find is the obligation of every teacher to give his/her own opinion about the level of knowledge students demonstrate as far as their mother tongue is concerned when they are being evaluated at the end of every school term.

Nevertheless, this is a reality that, in spite of everything, the Ministry of Education has been trying to change over the last years, mainly because of the curricular re-organization decreed in 2001, in particular with the introduction of the curricular areas named “Supervised Study” and “Project Area”. As every teacher can be responsible for these curricular areas, all the issues concerning reading and literacy have been discussed much more frequently and by more and more people, teachers, librarians and parents included. Even if reading and literacy are neither a priority in the curricular projects in basic schools nor object of collaborative teaching or reflection involving teachers, librarians and parents (when the PISA’s results – Programme for International Students Assessment- were published in Portugal in 2001 and 2004, the common reaction was to ignore or underestimate them), it is undeniable that more and more teachers have become conscious of the importance reading and literacy assume in building school success, lifelong learning and full citizenship for everyone.

These teachers, having been involved sometime in isolated projects of reading and literacy promotion, especially with their own students, have come to recognise the importance of collaborative teaching with other teachers and the pedagogical structures inside and outside the school, namely the school library and the public library. Therefore, the public presentation made by the government of the National Reading Plan³ on the 1st of June 2006 (the first National Reading Plan ever made in Portugal) can only be greeted with enthusiasm, hoping it will achieve the main goal it is supposed to achieve: increasing the reading habits of the Portuguese population, especially among children and teenagers.

Collaborative Teaching: a view on the current situation

I believe that, in the great majority of schools in Portugal, the activities carried through in order to promote reading and literacy present the following characteristics: they

³ www.planonacionaldeleitura.gov.pt

take place occasionally and not systematically and they are planned and executed especially to fulfil some sort of activity plan that must be presented to the leading staff. We cannot say that there is collaborative strategy involving the great majority of teachers because it is clear to everyone that the educational policies schools adopt do not refer to reading and literacy as priorities or, even worse, they do not refer to reading and literacy at all. Furthermore, this theme has not been object of reflection among the teachers and other members of the pedagogical coordination structures within the schools. It is clear to me that, if reading and literacy are not discussed, this means that they are not considered to be important. The only exception I can find is the technological literacy as every school in Portugal includes the new Information and Communication Technologies in the 9th and 10th grade students' curricula.

So, generally speaking, activities concerning reading and literacy are the exclusive responsibility of teachers of Portuguese and school librarians. In some schools they both fulfil their duties; in most of them, nothing is done. Students are told to read their school books in the classroom and that is considered enough. Among those who do something for reading and literacy, the most common activities are literary contests, meetings with writers and illustrators, reading clubs, book's fairs, exhibition of students' projects, publishing schools' newspapers and helping students finding, selecting and organising information.

However, these activities do not achieve the results they were supposed to achieve (the reading habits of the Portuguese population are there to prove it) and there are two reasons that can explain it: the first one is that collaborative teaching is something Portuguese teachers don't usually do, so it is still unnatural to them; the second reason is that these activities are usually aimed at students who reveal both reading habits and literacy skills. Those who do not reveal these qualities are usually excluded from these activities of promoting reading and literacy skills because they lack precisely the qualities they must have in order to be able to participate in them. In other words, the skills students were supposed to develop are precisely the reasons that prevent them from being part of those reading and literacy activities. The outcome is obviously an increasing gap between those students who have reading habits and literacy skills and those who do not. The first ones have learnt how to learn and so they learn more quickly and efficiently; the second ones did not learn how to learn and so they don't have the same learning opportunities.

School libraries and the digital world

It goes without saying that in Portugal school libraries have a long way to go in adopting the new communication technologies and adapt to the digital world. To some extent, we might say that we are now leaving the Stone Age. Computers and networks are now reaching the minimum standards and some limited experiences are being tried in some school libraries: accessing e-books, e-journals and other e-resources, publishing on-line catalogues, on-line activities or on-line discussion groups.

However, technology is expensive and school libraries, as well as any other library, have to deal with a double investment: in books and other paper documents on one hand; in multimedia technology on the other hand. And this is a real problem we cannot forget as school libraries' budgets are already so tight.

And yet I believe the e-learning environment is the key to develop collaborative teaching and, by doing so, promoting reading and literacy. In an early stage, e-learning activities should be the continuity of classroom activities, so that teachers, students and parents are simultaneously involved in a new learning process.

For example, a reading session in the classroom can be followed by a reading contest or a blog using the Internet, where students, parents and teachers interact with each other. At the end of a reading session in the classroom, we can ask students to illustrate or comment on what they have just read and we can put those drawings or comments on the school library's web site. We can read a story in the classroom and show related images or videos from the Internet at the same time.

There can be no doubt that the new Information and Communication Technologies are appealing to young people. I'm not so sure if they are as appealing to most teachers!

Schools, reading and literacy: catalysts and constraints

There are several situations inside basic and secondary schools in Portugal that we can identify as catalysts or constraints as far as promoting reading and literacy is concerned. Some are general issues common to the great majority of Portuguese schools but others are very specific to a number of schools and they occur because of their educational policy and historic reality. In either case, somehow they all have to do with school libraries and we can summarize them as follows:

Catalysts	Constraints
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A growing number of teachers who care and worry about reading and literacy • The training students are provided with as far as the new Information and Communication Technologies are concerned • The growing importance school libraries are having in every basic and secondary school • The growing recognition that affects school libraries in general both from the Ministry of Education and the leading staff in every school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School libraries physical conditions are not always the most appropriate (some are too small; there are not enough tables, shelves, computers; most of them have no air conditioning...) • Bibliographic resources in school libraries are, in a considerable percentage, inappropriate, insufficient and out of date • Teachers in general are not used to collaborative teaching • Inside the schools, most people still looks at school libraries in a traditional way, over evaluating their resources and underestimating their educational role • Catalogues are generally still incomplete and

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing school libraries with more human, material and financial resources • The use students make of school libraries • Most school libraries are open all day long and at least one member of the helping staff and a teacher are always present • Teachers in Portugal are at school for longer periods of time, so they can help students outside their classrooms 	<p>this fact makes information research much more difficult</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A great percentage of teachers doesn't know and therefore doesn't make use of the resources school libraries have at their disposal • The educational system in Portugal is constantly changing, so teachers feel uncomfortable and uncertain • Teachers from different levels do not collaborate with each other • The performance standards in reading in the 1st grade are not defined, so many students go on to the 2nd grade without reading correctly • Most 1st grade schools do not have a library • Students who did not learn to read correctly in the 1st grade do not have the necessary support to acquire this basic ability successfully • Teachers do not provide their students with all the tools they need to carry on research activities • In general, parents and families are kept away from school, so reading is not seen as a significant activity
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Reading, literacy and collaborative teaching: now what?

Having in mind everything previously said about reading, literacy and collaborative teaching in Portugal, we must ask: now what?

In trying to answer this question, the first option is to consider that everything is still to be done and, from this point on, try to involve in the cause of reading, literacy and collaborative teaching, in an early stage, all those (teachers and parents included) who reveal some kind of interest and worry with these issues.

The second step is to get teachers together in working groups, including teachers from pre-school to secondary school, whose mission is to debate and propose effective actions to fight illiteracy and the decline in reading according to the National Reading Plan, in order to include these issues as priorities in schools educational policies.

Since no changes can occur inside the schools without the teachers, the third step is obviously to try to involve teachers and parents in discussing and adopting effective actions to promote reading and literacy, so that, by the end of October, it is possible to approve and announce a group of activities that include, systematically and in different levels, the great majority of students and their families throughout the whole school year.

The fourth step is to define an educational team in every school library that represents as many different areas of knowledge as possible (Portuguese, English, French, Mathematics, Sciences, History, Geography, Arts). The message these teachers must pass on must be clear: the school library is an important educational resource teachers can rely on in planning their classes and teaching activities, so that their involvement with the school library is no longer occasional and becomes systematic and collaborative.

The training and personal characteristics of the teachers working in the school library, especially the school librarian, are also decisive in developing collaborative teaching among and with teachers. In fact, the school librarian, as well as the teachers who work with him in the school library, must be seen as specialists as far as reading and information-documentation are concerned, so that they can be accepted as valid and active participants in the process of collaborative teaching we are trying to achieve.

The fifth step deals with the contribution of students' families in promoting reading and literacy. In order to achieve this goal, collaborative work is essential, so that parents become aware of how important literary reading is, the books they should advise their children to read, how they should help them at home, organising their study...

We should never forget that many parents fail to help their children just because they don't know how!

The next step is to bring all students to the school library at the beginning of the school year and organise some sort of research activity previously arranged with their teachers. If they succeed in doing that research activity – and they should succeed –, then they will expect to use the school library more often in the future.

The school library should also collaborate with teachers in helping students overcoming their reading difficulties. It is not possible for students to improve their reading skills if they don't read. So, the best way to fight illiteracy and, consequently, school failure is to provide students with the abilities to read efficiently, the pleasure of reading and the tools for lifelong learning. In the paper Ross Todd presented during last year's conference in Lisbon entitled "From Learning to Read to Reading to Learn: School Libraries, Literacy and Guided Inquiry"⁴, the first step to "reading to learn" is obviously "learning to read".

Organising reading sessions involving teachers of different areas of knowledge should be done systematically and students should participate in those sessions at least every two weeks. The school library must obviously take the lead in this issue, planning these sessions along with the teachers and using the new Information and Communication Technologies whenever possible.

⁴ Presented at the 35th Annual Conference of the International Association of School Librarians (IASL): The Multiple Facets of Literacy, Lisbon, Portugal.

Another important step is the example all teachers must pass on to their students as far as books and reading are concerned. In fact, every teacher should bring books (newspapers, magazines...) to his/her classes, show them to their students, discuss them and look for some sort of information. Books should be constantly present in the classroom and the role of the school library in this matter is to promote books and systematically stress their formative and informative value.

Finally, the last and probably the most decisive step is to give time to students during classes to read. In all classes, some time of students' daily schedule should be dedicated to literary reading, but also to writing, because writing is both a consequence and a stimulus for reading. Reading and writing correctly, meaningfully and efficiently are, at different levels, the ultimate goals of collaborative teaching!

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