Academic achievement and/or educational attainment – The role of teacher librarians in students' future:
Main findings of a research in Portugal

Ana Novo
PhD Student
Department of History, Évora University
Portugal

José António Calixto
Director
Évora Public Library
Portugal

This paper aims at analysing 20 teacher librarians definitions' of academic achievement and educational attainment targeting their students' preparation for the future. Reflection is also done on how these teacher librarians see their roles and specific qualifications in relation with those concepts. This research work, belonging to a PhD program, is focused on School Libraries of Portuguese public elementary integrated schools, which were in the school libraries network till 2005. This research used a qualitative methodology both for data gathering and analysis techniques.

Academic achievement, educational attainment, teacher librarians, Portugal.

Background

Academic achievement is often referred and debated in educational policies and discourses. There is nowadays, as Almeida et al. (2005, p. 3629) say "a deep and empirically tested knowledge about the factors that lay on the basis of school learning processes and which impact its development, but mainly about the learning processes difficulties". Both national and international researchers talk about academic achievement but also about educational attainment, giving to these expressions different meanings. Academic achievement is often linked with successful student's individual capacities and abilities and is defined by Rodrigues (2001, p.24) as "the student's school results, i.e., a student who being in the school system, public or private, with the convenient age, finishes a high school degree or equivalent, successfully, without neither interruptions nor failings". Educational attainment is a wider concept when compared with academic achievement, as it also embraces other complex variables that are linked with the process of progressing through all schooling levels.

Through a literature review, several factors contributing to academic achievement and educational attainment were identified. Lance (Library Research Service) and Williams (2001) studies show relationships between a well-staffed school library and students

academic achievement. Collaborative work between qualified full time teacher librarians and curriculum teachers also impact students' literacy, learning and problem solving. The work developed by school librarians could be an important predictor of students academic achievement and / or educational attainment as they can provide access to information, instruct students on information literacy competencies and build a stronger relationship with the whole educational community.

Methodology

This research work, belonging to a PhD program, is focused on school libraries (SL) of Portuguese elementary integrated schools (EBIs), which were till 2005 in the Portuguese school libraries network (RBE). This research used qualitative methodology either for data gathering and analysis techniques. Qualitative methodologies have been frequently referred (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997) as being particularly suitable for library and information studies research. Therefore, the majority of data was obtained through semi-structured interviews and field notes resulting from non-participant direct observation to selected respondents.

This research work was divided into several phases. In the first one, questionnaires were sent, by mail, to the teacher librarians (TL) of the 57 EBIs, belonging to the RBE, till 2005, and distributed through out the five Portuguese educational authorities. This questionnaire was asking for factual information on human resources and equipment. The analysis of the 41 returned completed questionnaires (72%), allowed, in a second phase, the selection of 20 SL following the maximum diversity criteria: teacher librarians with (WT) and with out (WOT) specific training, SL characteristics, EBI's characteristics and geographical location. In these schools, during November and December 2006 and January 2007, the fieldwork was developed with semi-structured interviews, non-participant direct observation and field notes taken while and after observation was taking place. The third phase was dedicated to the transcription of all interviews, their coding and analysis using the Atlas.ti software. This paper results from this third phase.

Academic achievement and educational attainment defined

The majority of the interviewed TL distinguishes between academic achievement and educational attainment. For them, academic achievement is closely linked with school marks and with successfully progressing on schooling levels as is well illustrated by the following phrases,

> *Academic achievement is getting a school mark that allows to go on or to fail.*
> (P7, L9, WOT)
> *Academic achievement is the achievement that students have at school through quantitative and qualitative evaluations.*
> (P14, C10, WT)

Educational attainment has been more frequently used in high school and first-degree environments and could not be measured only by the academic achievement obtained at various subjects and its marks, because it is a wider concept when compared with academic achievement. Educational attainment embraces academic and cognitive qualifications but also personal, interpersonal and institutional variables that are involved on the process of progressing through schooling levels (Tavares, 1996; Correia, Gonçalves e Pile, s. d.).

For Tavares (1996), the important thing for students would be "their integrated personal and social development and its balance, their sense and maturity, their ability to be creative and to develop relationships between equals and hierarchical superiors and to be able to solve tensions and conflicts at work places".

In Pinto's (2000, p. 9) opinion, "academic achievement and educational attainment are different things". This author distinguishes the concepts in terms of "something" that is lacking in academic achievement for it to be labeled as educational attainment. As he says, "the first something that lacks in academic achievement has to do with procedures" (idem, p. 10). These are procedures that aim preparing juveniles for their future active life, knowing better how to perform and be able to satisfy economic production needs. In business-employers perspective this is the true educational attainment. "The second something that is lacking in academic achievement has to do with attitudes" (idem, p.10). These are business and political oriented attitudes as it is aimed that the school system promotes the European ideal. "So, educational attainment – **beyond** academic achievement – is evaluated by the learning level of attitudes and values, having as a reference the political willing of **building the European project** (idem, bold in the original). There will be educational non-attainment (attitudes and values) in economy, " if what comes out of the educational system does not fit with business needs", as well as in politics, "if juveniles don't identify themselves with the European ideal" (idem).

These "some things" that lack in academic achievement so that it could turn into educational attainment are also identified by Silva (1998, p. 109) when he says that educational attainment "aims at educating today's children and juveniles, tomorrow's active citizens, so that they would be both happy and fulfilled adults, and also be able to build a more balanced and solidary society, in a more conscious and responsible world, free and plural, engaged with humanism values".

This opinion is also shared by one of the TL,

Educational attainment is something more, it would be educating for citizenship, learning to be, more than having a good mark, learning abilities that allow them to survive outside in the world. This is or should be education's primary aim.
(P13, G1, WOT)

Several TLs opinion's about the role that schools could or should have in promoting educational attainment is well seem in the following statements,

Educational attainment would be the whole school working for a positive building of the students. For me, educational attainment is students leaving school being better, not perfect, human beings.
(P7, L9, WOT)
I would include in educational attainment, the personal education. Students are human beings and I think […] that the school system has an obligation of also educating students as a person.
(P5, L11, WOT)

For the majority of TL interviewed, educational attainment is seen with a wider sense, when compared with their definition of academic success, on which they include the feeling of belonging to a group and the values that are associated to it. The following opinion is a good example,
Educational attainment embraces many more things, it has to do with teamwork and respect for the others. It deals with much wider concepts."

(P32, A5, WOT)

Many of these TL think that the delivery of these values should be made by the school system as a whole. These values aim at students receiving both curriculum and behaviour competencies, like "rules" and "knowing how to behave", to prepare them better for facing future challenges. The majority of students do not possess these abilities that are, in TLs' opinion, mandatory for students overall success, as is expressed by this TL,

Educational attainment is when students acquire necessary competencies that will allow them, latter on, to be autonomous and creative. They go on, with these abilities, and build new things, new knowledge and new life perspectives.
(P10, L3, WOT)

Some opinions, both from teacher librarians WT and WOT, suggest difficulties to separate both concepts. These TL prefer to think and to act having put together academic achievement and educational attainment or "all in one", which could be better understood with the following comment,

[…] I am not able to distinguish those. I do not feel comfortable with that because as a teacher, I always think in terms of educational attainment, there is no academic or educational. Being a teacher, and when I am with my pupils, I think of it all, their learning of the curriculum and their education as a person. It is a whole mission […]. Now people talk a lot about knowing how to do and how to be, but as a gymnastic teacher I have been evaluating students on those parameters and we have been calling the schools' attention for this issue because students need to know how to behave, how to socialize, how to work in a team."
(P5, L11, WOT)

The "rules", behaviour and knowledge related with the way they are in or use the SL, which students do not have or do not do, or even are not aware of, are referred mainly by teacher librarians WOT, as being mandatory for students' (non) achievements, as is expressed by these words,

[There is the need to have] rules for these students as they have bad habits. They used to think of the SL as a students common room. There are rules that need to be learned for things to work properly. These rules and behaviour manners have to be delivered to students.
(P1, N5, WOT)

Some teacher librarians WT and WOT, faced some difficulties in expressing their thoughts or even were not able to answer at all when asked to provide definitions for academic achievement and educational attainment concepts. A few of them were confused and gave different meanings to the concepts. Some of these hesitations and misunderstandings were as follows,

Ah, providing definitions is complicated [silence]*. How do I define* [silence]*, what is academic achievement and educational attainment?* [silence] *Hum...* [silence]*. I am not able to distinguish or define those concepts.*
(P19, C3, WOT)

Hum, [silence] *academic achievement and educational attainment* [silence] *that is something very complicated. I do not know how to answer that.*
(P2, N3, WT)

Teacher librarians roles' and specific qualifications: impact on academic achievement and educational attainment

Being a TL is, for the interviewed and in general terms, a very important, demanding and embracing task as the following opinion shows,

This is a post with much responsibility. We have to be aware of everything, not only with what relates to the SL but also with the whole school, with everything that might be important for the different departments, for the management board, for parents, for the whole school community. If I only think in terms of the SL four walls I loose the perception of what it can provide to the outside. TLs have to be very much focused, very well informed and able to deliver the right answers.
(P18, C4, WT)

TL can have a vital role on students learning, because the work they develop, opens up their way to long life learning, allowing them to turn into information specialists. TL's roles and competencies are diverse and can change according to the educational community's characteristics and teacher and students' specific needs. Several TL referred that their role was interesting and vital for students' educational attainment and a post occupied with much pleasure. Nevertheless, its importance was not acknowledged most of the times,

I think that it is a very important role but people do not recognize it. Everybody thinks that TL is someone who has been put in the SL by mistake or because has an illness, who do not have any classes to teach and do not do any work. It is someone who seats in the SL reading a newspaper. This is very unfair because we work a lot and the things we do are very important. The development of activities and the coming of students to the SL really depend on TL abilities.
(C10, P14, WT)

According to the majority of the interviewed, TL should be teachers with specific training to work in SL, having competencies to be responsible for the development of students' information literacy, to work in collaboration with the whole school community and to develop strategies and activities that promote the love of reading and writing. They agree on the fundamental role they play in terms of fighting against school failures and for some of them, their role can impact positively student's academic achievement,

TLs can have an impact, together with the SL team, by promoting all sorts of activities that attract students to the SL. It is not only coming to the SL, it should be coming with an objective. They should come and find a place with resources that help them to overcome their difficulties both in terms of curriculum and wider areas.
(P6, L10, WT)

It is desirable that TLs possess several professional and personal competencies. Professional competencies include being a partner on the educational process, an information specialist and a manager both of human and material resources. For the majority of the interviewed, specific training and SL qualifications would be specially reflected on the way the SL is organised, in terms of space, resources and activities, as is referred by this TL,

Specific training and qualifications in SL would be very important and impact students educational attainment, because we would have more knowledge, other ways of involving students in information research process and we would better know how to organize things. Training would be a big help.
(P22, A6, WOT)

Personal competencies are being available to look for new opportunities, partners and alliances, being able to efficiently communicate, work in a team, being creative, flexible and positive, and open to LLL. For Silva (2002), TLs should be well informed, open and active, have good training in all domains (technical, educational and human relations) and be able to attract to the SL an ever growing number of people, transforming this place into a real learning centre. The following comment is a good practical example,

[TLs] have a push forward role but it all depends on each one way of thinking. For the students I have, I try to give dynamism to the SL as to attract them so they enjoy spending time in the SL and learn something at the same time. It all depends on the kind of person you are, [some] teachers think that TLs only have to worry about the book collection, its cataloguing and indexing, the technical side of it. But I have so many students that do not read at all that I am not interested in the technical bits. I am focused on students and I am trying to captivate them the better I can.
(L9, P7, WOT)

TLs could use personal competencies and abilities to effectively communicate both inside and outside the school, showing a pro-active attitude towards all school community members and developing individual and group relationships,

To be sincere, I am not sure if my post-graduation in Librarianship has any impact on these school students. If another teacher were here, even without any training but with the energy I have, it would probably work as well. People, who love the SL and have a lot of good willing to develop this, can also do a good job. The thing is that those persons wouldn't be able to have all these resources organized as they are because they do not have the knowledge. Apart from this, things would work.
(P2, N3, WT)

For some of the teacher librarians WT and WOT, personal competencies are the important and fundamental factor and what might impact student's educational attainment.

Factors contributing to academic achievement and educational attainment

Collaborative work

The analysis of the interviews suggests that the existence of collaborative work at various levels is one of the requisites for students' educational attainment. This collaborative work would happen both inside and outside the school, having TL as permanent partners and the other teachers, the school community, the school management board, other schools, the public library and other libraries as temporary partners.

The theme collaboration between TL and curriculum teachers emerges from all the interviewees discourse as one of the most important factors for the development of their work and with impact on students' educational attainment.

For me, success has not only to do with the kids, there has to be an involvement of all groups, of the teachers and other school staff. It can't be accepted the lack of partnership between curriculum group teachers, auxiliary school staff, with who ever it is, because [for TL] to be able to organise and implement activities, teachers must incentive pupils to attend SL activities'.
(P8, L6, WOT)

The need to exist collaborative work between teachers of various schooling levels, areas, subjects or even with other schools, between TL and teachers and between TL and the school management board seems to be for the interviewees under research, a central question and around which almost everything can be articulated.

Because if that complicity does not exist between the work we develop here and the curriculum teacher and the pupils, the work just has half or even less, the objective to be accomplished. Our work would stop having any importance or meaning.
(P1, N5, WOT)

One can say that a collaborative work is not only a sum of personal contributions but also a true interaction between the involved actors on the activity. It is therefore desirable that all participants' aim at common objectives, which were previously agreed by the whole group. Collaborative work between teachers is often referred in national and international educational literature. Some national authors ((Boavida e Ponte, 2002; Ferreira e Almeida, 2003; Roldão, 2007; Santos, 2007) and international ones (Leonard & Leonard, 2001, 2003; Pugach & Johnson, 1998; Fishbaugh, 1998; Hart, 1998; Houston, 1980, cf Montiel-Overall, 2005), have been reflecting on this issue, which is thought of being "in fashion". Collaboration, for these authors, could be developed, most of times, between teachers aiming the implementation of curricula practices and extra-curricula activities.

It is nevertheless interesting to see that none of these authors include or mention the school librarian as a participant of the collaborative work. This could be linked to the lack of knowledge about TL duties and characteristics, his / her place in the school and in the SL or even to some uncertainty towards the definition of collaboration and the ways it can and / or should assume.

If all of us think the same way towards this place [SL], when students come into the SL in an inappropriate manner, we tell them "do not behave like this, you have to be more careful". If by chance a teacher sees this and at the classroom reinforces that position, explaining how to behave properly, if we [teachers] all speak the same language, they [students] will understand it better and easily. Sometimes we notice that the teachers are the ones who don't know and if we call them here to have a conversation, the ones that need guidance are who do not come. If there is a good relationship, if all of us work in collaboration, we will reach the SL objectives much easier.
(P14, C10, WT)

International literature on Information and Library Science include a huge variety of studies, both quantitative and qualitative, on school libraries and teacher librarians, which conclude they improve students' learning and have an impact on their academic achievement and educational attainment. There is also a wide rage of international literature on collaboration between TL and curriculum teachers (School Library Manifesto, IFLA,

UNESCO, 1999; Keith Curry Lance, Library Research Service; Montiel-Overall, 2005, 2006).

After analysing the 20 TL interviews and based on the processes that end on collaboration (Dickinson, 2006 and Montiel-Overall, 2006), it was only possible to identify cooperation and coordination work examples. The fact that the work developed between TL and teachers could not be labelled as true collaboration, might be a consequence of several factors: lack of knowledge of collaboration's definition; teaching very much focused on the teacher and his / her class; some resistance towards recognising TL post which, also being teachers, has its own tasks and activities to develop inside the school.

Therefore, the cooperation or coordination work developed and considered by all interviewed as "Important" or "Very important" to students' educational attainment and to the development of their duties, could have even more impact if there were favourable conditions to culminate it in true collaboration.

Being a full time teacher librarian

Quantitative studies, mainly the ones conducted in the USA by Keith Curry Lance (Library Research Service) in several states, are particularly interesting as they identify relationships and direct degrees of association between several variables. These studies, apart from differences in schools and in student population, show a positive statistical correlation between students' academic achievement and TL with specific training to perform their duties, working full time and who dedicate a considerable amount of time working in collaboration with teachers integrating information competencies and the curriculum.

In Portugal and during 2006/2007 academic year, time when interviews were conducted, there were only 7 full time TL. The following year (2007/2008) there were already 107 for the 2nd and 3rd schooling cycles and about 130 from the 1st cycle. This academic year (2008/2009), the RBE board was allowed to select 500 full time TL for the 1st, 2nd and 3rd elementary and secondary schooling cycles and highlighted the possibility for teachers to apply exclusively for this post during 2009. The raising number of full time TL and the chance they might have in the future of applying solely for this full time post, clearly reflects a significant investment in this area, adding value to SL and starting the TL institutionalisation process.

Only one of the TL interviewed was part of the initial group of seven. This TL having had the opportunity to work full time and thus have more time to spend in the SL, says that time is not still enough as she had chosen to keep a class which is occupying much of her time.

This year I am working full time. I am one of the 7 TL who had the chance to work solely in the SL but I also decided to keep a class. I used to think that if I was working full time things would be much easier. Right now I think that the time I have is not enough because the work in the SL seems to keep growing everyday. The time I spend with the class board, preparing classes, organising exams is a lot and there is no time left, on the contrary, I work many more hours than the ones I was given.
(P21, A7, WT)

The remaining 19 TL, being full time teachers, have to distribute the time set to work in the SL according to their classes' timetable which sometimes means a great effort.

The SL is a space that requires a lot of work and a lot of availability from us. I am here 7h and the remaining I teach. The work in the SL gives me much pleasure and I had enjoyed last year's experience very much but it is very time consuming as I always have to research a lot in the Internet, be constantly aware of what other SL

are doing and suggestions from RBE, to help me with more ideas. To turn these ideas into activities takes a lot of time and sometimes I spend more time in the SL than with my students.
(P1, N5, WOT)

These TL have also referred that being full time teachers and TL implied lack of "continuity" on their work. Going in and out of the SL to teach in a classroom does not allow for a solid work with real knowledge about specific needs of that school community, as it is expressed by this TL,

[…] I felt I needed more continuity because coming here 90 minutes and going out to teach afterwards and returning again to the SL, is not so productive as if I was here two full mornings or one full morning and one full afternoon. One looses the notion of what is going on here. I end up with just SL assistant's feedback. The kind of students that come to the SL in the mornings is different from the one in the afternoons and I like to know the whole SL users.
(P14, C10, WT)

It is interesting to perceive some mixed feelings and differences of opinions among TL with and without specific training when faced with the chance of working full time. TL with training view this possibility with openness and even some enthusiasm, considering it as a benefit to their work which also would give them time to work in collaboration with teachers, fact seen as very important to student's educational attainment. The integration of information competencies and the curriculum, and organising and managing all SL resources would then be done with greater intensity and quality.

[Being full time TL] is the ideal situation to be 100%. […] When my colleagues, alone in the classrooms, need support to organise and manage information, something that students don't know how to do, I made myself available. But when I go to their classes it's always outside my timetable because I also teach and it is difficult to conciliate things.
(P9, L4, WT)

On their turn, TL without any training, even facing time management difficulties but considering full time TL an important asset, show some reluctance on choosing working full time because they really enjoy being teachers in a classroom environment. Therefore, they would always prefer to keep one class at least, for not getting away from certain realities, or rather having more time set to the SL, meaning more hours to the TL or to the team. For some of these teachers, being a full time TL would mean stop working with students, breaking the direct relationship built inside a classroom and for these reasons they have stressed the need to keep a class.

[…] Because full time would mean doing just this, and so I would stop working with the kids. I think that one thing helps the other and so part time would be the ideal situation.
(P7, L9, WOT)

Providing access to information

Till May 2009, the RBE program was able to equip 2080 school libraries with technological infra-structures aiming at satisfying information needs of its educational community and turning them into spaces where students learn how to learn and inform themselves continuously through out their lives.

Students, followed by teachers and then by the school community as a whole, are the target group for the majority of TL. It was for them that the book collection was selected, to whom activities are addressed and for whom there is so much work and dedication a lot of hours per week. Many of the SL visited are inside rural environments, with very low socio-cultural levels, where students do not have great expectations and only go to school because it is mandatory.

The reality found across the 20 schools was very diverse. For some of the TL, the work they develop, aiming students' academic achievement and their preparation for the future, depends a lot on the way students have access to information,

> *Fighting against school failure has also to be done through fighting against illiteracy and I think the SL performs an extremely important role on our students' literacy. The SL is the source of information they have access to but they do not know how to use it. It is here they can get the answer to any curriculum difficulties and get help with the homework.*
> (P13, G1, WOT)

The access to SL by students, in terms of their opening hours, sometimes was not suitable to certain school populations that depend on these resources to have access to information either through computers and the internet (one of the main reasons for going to the SL), or newspapers and magazines or even books and audio-visual material.

It was not found in any SL a systematic gathering of information that could be used to make statistics on SL usage and questions like «who?», «when?», «why?» and «what?» could be easily answered. All this information could be the base for selecting new material that could eventually be more adequate to SL public and serve as an argument for changes in priorities and as a justification for a budget increase. Through these statistics it would probably be more feasible to measure SL impact as a whole on student academic achievement, literacy, reading levels and access to information, similarly to what has been happening internationally (e.g. Lance, Rodney and Hamilton-Pennel (2000); Ireland (2001); Willians and Wavell (2002); Lonsdale (2003).

Conclusions

Almost all TL distinguish between academic achievement and educational attainment concepts. For them, academic achievement is closely linked with school marks and educational attainment includes the feeling of belonging to a group and the values that are associated to it. These values aim at students receiving both curriculum and behaviour competencies that will prepare them better for facing future challenges.

Being a TL is a very important, demanding and embracing task as he /she can have a vital role on students learning and their academic achievement.

For the interviewed, TL should be teachers both with professional and personal competencies. Nevertheless, some teacher librarians WT and WOT, felt that personal

competencies are the important and fundamental factor and what might impact student's educational attainment.

Collaborative work at various levels is seen as one of the requisite conditions for students' educational attainment and one of the most important factors for the development of TL work. However, only cooperation and coordination work examples were identified.

For some TL, being full time curriculum teachers implied lack of "continuity" on their work and a constraint to the development of a solid work, which aims students' academic achievement. They also agree that the way students' access information will have an impact on their academic achievement and /or educational attainment.

Besides this research was under taken in SLs from the north to the south of Portugal, there were common areas that needed priority attention. Intervention from school management boards, educational regional authorities and the RBE would be crucial for considering TL roles as an important factor that could impact educational attainment.

Some recommendations or suggestions

The existence of challenges to TLs' role in preparing students for the future is undeniable. Schools, through their management boards, would need to recognize SL and TL as resources and precious elements for students' educational attainment.

Implementation and promotion of collaborative work between TL and curriculum teachers should also be a priority given the evidence of its advantages for students' learning.

The ones responsible for the support and development of SL in schools would need to work towards a common educational priority: the legislative diploma that will set rules for teachers willing to apply for a full time TL post.

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Biographical Notes

Ana Novo is a PhD student and her research topic is "School libraries with or without a librarian? – Impact study on the academic achievement at EBIs".

José António Calixto is the Director of Évora Public Library since 2003 and his research interests are the social importance of public libraries and their educational roles.

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.