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Parents and the School Library: A Longitudinal Study With Elementary Schools in Portugal

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Abstract: *This longitudinal study investigates parental involvement in school libraries (SL) across four regions in Portugal, examining data from 2015, 2017, and 2019. It explores how parents engage with SL initiatives, particularly in reading promotion, and evaluates their perceptions of the SL's role in academic success. The study highlights disparities in parental engagement across different regions and underscores the importance of effective communication and collaboration between parents and SLs. The findings reveal that enhanced parental involvement positively impacts students' learning outcomes, emphasizing the need for inclusive practices to foster stronger school-community ties.*

Keywords: *parent involvement, school libraries, reading promotion, school library evaluation model, Portugal*

Introduction

The role of parental involvement in schools is multifaceted, with a significant impact on student outcomes, as highlighted by numerous studies (Alston-Abel & Berninger, 2018). Specifically,

research has also explored parental engagement in activities conducted by school libraries, underscoring its importance, particularly in promoting reading.

In Portugal, school libraries (SL) are evaluated through a specific model that includes a questionnaire administered to parents. This survey comprises eight closed-ended questions addressing various aspects, such as parents' knowledge of the library, their participation in library activities, and their perception of the library's role in reading and learning. The evaluation model aims to establish a connection between the processes implemented by school libraries, the value they generate, and the visions for future development (Bastos, Martins & Conde, 2011).

Understanding the dynamics between school libraries and parents is essential, especially regarding communication, advocacy, and the extent of parents' knowledge of the SL's contributions to students' academic progress. Additionally, the study examines how parents contribute to the library's activity plan, offering insights into how these partnerships influence educational outcomes.

Literature Review

Collaboration within school libraries has been studied extensively over the decades (Merga et al., 2021), particularly regarding partnerships with classroom teachers. However, the collaboration between parents and school libraries is equally crucial in enhancing educational experiences and fostering community engagement. Establishing such partnerships offers valuable opportunities to connect parents, their children, and schools. For instance, studies reveal that parents report positive experiences when collaborating with schools and participating in multidisciplinary teams (Jones, 2016).

Effective advocacy is a key element of parental involvement in supporting school libraries (Chrastka, 2024). Schools and teacher-librarians should prioritize expanding communication channels with parents. Ensuring that every student and family feels welcomed in the SL is vital, particularly for young children with disabilities or developmental delays, as inclusive library programming can reduce social isolation (Spiering et al., 2024). King and Kammer (2023) emphasize the critical role of school libraries in fostering community engagement by building strong partnerships with parents. They argue that creating these connections not only enhances the library's impact but also strengthens the broader educational

experience by promoting collaborative events and activities that bring families and schools closer together. They highlight events like "Reading Night" and "STEAM Night," which encourage family participation and strengthen ties between schools and the broader community.

Collaborative events between parents and SLs promote literacy and cultivate a love of reading. Activities such as community read-aloud engage families and underscore the importance of reading in children's development. School librarians can also foster partnerships by involving parents in library advisory boards, where they can contribute to library decisions and programming (Chrastka, 2024). Although this practice is not yet common in Portugal, data from this study highlight its potential benefits.

School libraries also serve as essential resources for parents, providing educational materials and workshops to support children's learning. These initiatives help parents assist their children with homework and research, thus reinforcing the library's role as a key educational ally.

Methodology

This study is part of a research agreement between Universidade Aberta and the Portuguese School Libraries Network. The data analyzed were collected from parent questionnaires administered in primary schools (levels 1 to 4) across four districts in mainland Portugal: coastal areas (Leiria and Setúbal) and inland areas (Vila Real and Évora). These regions represent diverse geographic and social contexts. The study examined data from three time periods (2015, 2017, and 2019) using basic statistical methods to identify trends and contrasts in parental involvement with the SL program.

The School Library Evaluation Model serves as both a management framework and a tool for internal improvement. It enables school libraries to independently assess their practices and devise strategies for development. The model evaluates four key domains:

1. **Domain A**: Contribution to the curriculum, teaching, and cooperation with teachers.

2. **Domain B**: Influence on reading skills and reading habits.

3. **Domain C**: Partnerships and cooperation networks.

4. **Domain D**: Management of services and resources.

Findings & Discussion

The analysis focused on four key areas:

1. **Parental Knowledge of the SL**: The extent of parental awareness about SL's activities, particularly in reading promotion, varied by region. Schools in inland areas, such as Vila Real and Évora, showed stronger parental engagement compared to coastal regions.

2. **Communication between SL and Parents**: Effective communication was identified as a critical factor. In some schools, limited awareness about library initiatives hindered parental involvement.

3. **SL Collaboration with Parents**: While collaboration showed slight improvements between 2015 and 2019, it remains below potential.

4. **Recognition of SL's Role in Learning**: Parents generally valued the SL's role in supporting students, especially in reading. However, some schools need to improve to avoid negative impacts on students' academic performance, particularly in reading.

Comparing the three evaluation cycles, 2017 yielded the most favorable results, while 2019 showed a decline in some areas. It is essential to compare these findings with data from 2023 to assess trends and determine the reasons behind the fluctuations.

Conclusion

In Portugal, school libraries are recognized by children as vital spaces for reading and borrowing books. Ensuring the future success of SLs requires the collective effort of the entire school community, including parents. Enhancing parental involvement through accessible communication and flexible engagement opportunities is crucial. As Chrastka (2024) notes, working parents may face time constraints, making it essential to offer virtual or alternative participation options.

Demonstrating the tangible impact of parental involvement on student success is fundamental. A community-engaged SL must address the needs of all students while fostering broader connections with parents (King & Kammer, 2023). Understanding barriers to parental engagement and developing strategies to overcome them are vital. Sharing success stories of

collaboration between SLs and parents can further highlight the value of these partnerships, a topic currently underrepresented on the School Library Network portal.

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Biographies

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