# Learning with the School Library: multi-literacies and collaboration

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**Abstract:** This article presents a research process framed in an action-research model, in the context of collaborative work, for which training was designed. Its objective was to put into practice the learning framework associated with the work of school libraries in Basic Education. With it, we tried to build and implement work tools that support teachers and students in the development of information literacy, in the construction of metacognitive strategies and, consequently, in the construction of autonomy processes, under the responsibility of a teacher librarian.

**Keywords**: Teacher librarian, Collaboration, Teacher professional development, Metacognition, Multi-literacies, Information Literacy, Portugal

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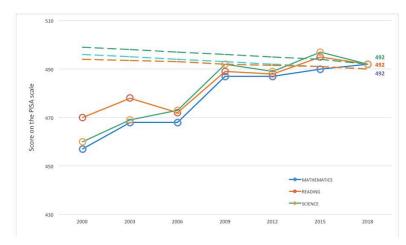
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#### 1. Introduction

The Aprender com a Biblioteca Escolar/Learning with the School Library framework (RBE, 2017) aims to create learning situations that favour the development of digital, reading, information and media literacies, which should be one of the focuses in pedagogical and didactic practices.

This document seeks, among other objectives, to «facilitate the teaching of literacies in terms of planning, operationalization and evaluation, opening it to new possibilities and didactic-pedagogical procedures» (RBE, 2017:12). The multidisciplinary nature of these literacies must therefore be left to teachers in general. The teacher librarian is also responsible for promoting the School Library as a privileged resource in this context, fostering strategies that facilitate the global education of students also in the field of literacies, allowing «continuous learning, a growing critical and ethically responsible awareness, as well as the cultural and social development indispensable for a rapidly changing world» (RBE, 2017:16), contributing to «practices of reflection on the management of the curriculum, the professional development of teachers and the assessment of learning and the educational path of students.» (RBE, 2017:16).

The results obtained by the Portuguese student population between 2009 and 2018 have shown progressive improvement when it comes to literacy levels international tests of (PISA, 2018:47-66). However, these results are still in the middle of the proficiency table, that is, at level 3. According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), «performance in the domain of reading literacy can be ranked according to six levels of proficiency, which correspond to varying degrees of complexity and depth of the dimensions that organize the domain. For reading literacy, the lowest level of proficiency is divided into three sub-levels – 1a, 1b and 1c – totalling eight levels of interpretation of student performance in 2018. Regarding reading, proficiency levels are stated in terms of «tasks require the reader...», leading to the identification of what student performance should reflect to be associated with a given level of proficiency». (PISA, 2018:27)



**Figure 1**. Evolution of average scores in PISA domains in Portugal compared to OECD averages

Note: The unbroken symbols indicate the years when the evaluated domain was the primary one.

Source: IAVE, from the OCDE (2000-2018) Programme for International Student Assessment – PISA 2018 (page 5).

«The average score obtained by Portugal on any of the reading subscales corresponds to a level 3 reading proficiency». (PISA, 2018:VI).

This means that children are able to locate various pieces of information that meet various conditions and, sometimes, identify relationships between them. They can also integrate various parts of a text to identify a main idea, understand relationships, or assign meaning to a word or sentence. They are also capable of establishing relationships, comparisons, producing explanations, and evaluating a particular aspect of a text. The average level of performance (level three) raises numerous questions for teachers regarding the work to be carried out with their students, first of all because it proves that being a speaker of a language is not a factor of mastery of all the cognitive processes that it encompasses (especially with regard to reading and writing). On the other hand, the Portuguese Basic Education programmes and the reflections made around

them (Roldão, 1999) support the conviction that something greater is desired. The skills that students must gain and develop are far beyond the daily practice in all cycles of that subject.

As teachers, we have an obligation to our students to provide them with instruments applicable to their daily lives, as citizens who want to be active, participatory, questioning, capable of fully interpreting any type of oral or written text, in a critical and comprehensive way.

Through a careful analysis of the skills defined for the Portuguese subject, we are alerted to the need to create mental structures that allow students to develop very solid reading and writing skills. Thus, there is the need to build and use work tools with very precise indications that can guide studentss in their learning, providing true autonomy and fluency in reading, interpreting and writing at a higher level.

According to the participatory reflection on the curricula of Basic Education, published in 1997 (Sim-Sim et al, 1997:43-50), the acquisition of the previously mentioned skills can only be achieved through explicit and systematic teaching and frequent and supervised practice. This is the responsibility of teachers, since written expression is a powerful form of communication and learning that requires an accurate mastery of precise, diverse and increasingly sophisticated techniques and strategies.

Therefore, among the primary functions of the School, the promotion of techniques for acquiring and developing the slills to autonomously manage the learning processes stands out. For Figueira (2007:3), metacognition is the process that allows subjects to control their processes and mechanisms of knowledge construction. Teachers are asked to act aimed at training students in this field. Thus, it is at School that metacognition must be stimulated. Supporting the development of metacognitive skills presupposes the creation of instruments that lead students to structure their ability to analyze, examine, criticize and systematize information.

In this sequence, research was conducted within an action-research model, in a context of collaborative work, for which training was designed. Its objective was to put into practice the learning framework associated with the work of school libraries in Basic Education. With it, we tried to build and implement work tools that would support teachers and students in the development of information literacy, in the creation of metacognitive strategies and, consequently, in the construction of autonomy processes.

## 2. Methodology

At the request of a teacher librarian, the training took place in a Group of State Schools located in the municipality of Oeiras, which currently serves a culturally, socially and economically very diverse population. This Group is made up of four schools.

According to information on its official website, around 730 children and young people attend the schools of the Group, distributed across the levels of preschool, 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycles of schooling. Of these, 7.5% are from African, South American, Asian and European countries, with a higher incidence in the Portuguese speaking countries. Around 34% of students benefit from School Welfare, of which 22% fall into the A level.

In the 2019-20 academic year, the Group presented to the Ministry of Education a Curriculum Innovation Plan focused on four strategic points (Guidance for School Success; Reinforcement of Essential Learning; Education Strategy for Citizenship; Multiliteracies, Arts & Crafts).

The objectives of this plan were: a) To promote collaborative work and pedagogical differentiation; b) To encourage participation in innovative programmes and projects; c) To educate for tolerance, peace, solidarity, environmental protection, healthy living and rights and duties; d) To prevent and combat indiscipline and other risk factors; e) To foster artistic expression and participation in cultural initiatives.

As a result of this framework, the teacher librarian of the Group (in employment for the second academic year) assessed the teachers' training needs.

One of the aspects mentioned by most of the teachers of the different subjects of the Group of Schools included in this study was the generalized inability that their students demonstrate in the interpretation of written materials of an informative nature (texts, maps, timetables, diagrams, tables, etc.). This indicated that the interpretation of narrative texts, grammatical work, work of written interpretation centered on the textbools, among others, fall far short of the information literacy work that it is necessary to promote the acquisition and development of metacognition and reading literacy skills.

Based on that assessment, a training course was designed with the aim of responding to the identified needs. It was called Project work and information literacy. This training course, aimed at Early Childhood Educators and Basic Education Teachers, with a duration of 15 hours, took place between January and April 2020, in the Group of Schools described above.

The group of trainees consisted of 21 people, 18 female and three male. Twenty belong to the School/Group and one to the Pedagogical Zone. Regarding the level of education, four trainees teach in the 1st cycle of Basic Education, six teach in the 2nd cycle of Basic Education, and 11 teach in the 3rd cycle of Basic Education. Three trainees were aged between 36 and 45 years old, 14 trainees between 46 and 55 years old and four trainees were over 55 years old.

Three of the trainees have between 16 and 20 years of teaching experience, and 18 more than 20 years of experience. After the beginning of the training, three trainees withdrew from the training course for personal reasons and two trainees did not obtain the certificate as they did not submit the final report. Thus, 16 trainees successfully completed this training course.

Bearing in mind that the teaching/learning of written expressions requires cognitive processes of content planning, its linguistic formatting, drafts, revisions, corrections and reformulations, as well as ommunicating the final products, this training proposal was based on the needs expressed to the librarian by the teachers. It intended to produce different working tools that would support them in their teaching practice, assisiting the students as potentiators of metacognitive structures.

Thus, the concrete planning of a didactic unit was presented – reading and writing for information and study – with the respective descriptions of the work intentions (activities) to be proposed to the students and the materials that supported the activities.

Given that knowledge is not watertight, we sought to involve the various disciplinary areas, transforming the Portuguese language (as a spoken and written language) into a practical instrument for multidisciplinary and functional work. The special focus was on the development of reading and writing skills for information and study, emphasizing the importance of sharing skills among peers through group work.

The general objectives of this training process focused on the following aspects:

- a) To provide teachers with the necessary tools so that they can be autonomous curriculum development agents in the creation of strategies suited to the needs of the community and the contexts where they work;
- b) To support the design of integrative curricula that bring together the school's activities and projects, stressing the importance of the transdisciplinary nature of learning, the mobilization of diverse literacies, promoting complex thinking, intellectual curiosity, critical and interventionist spirit and collaborative work as a source of learning and skills development;
- c) To promote social justice, equal opportunities, well-being, the quality of learning and the effective success of each person;
- d) To promote and support reflective processes on education legislation and curriculum documents; to support the construction of work tools that foster autonomy, flexibility and transdisciplinarity.

The following specific objectives were defined:

- To know and apply the phases of project work;
- To recognize the importance of applying metacognition strategies and instruments;
- To build/adapt information literacy tools appropriate to the students' developmental level;

- To create practical information literacy learning situations, using the previous tools;
- To enable trainees to support students in research, assessment and effective and responsible use of information, contributing to their empowerment and autonomy;
- To develop skills that respond to the new teaching and learning context defined in the aforementioned structuring documents.

This article deals with action research, carried out in practice, of a situational reality, with a view to better understand both the practice and the context in which it was developed, its implications from the point of view of learning, and also socially and culturally. Accordingly, it was intended\ to be a self-reflexive process in which, based on the defined question - How to put into practice the learning framework associated with the work of school libraries in Basic Education? -, qualitative research was carried out and later, through interviews, questionnaires and participation-observation, the results and the effectiveness of the action carried out against the speculative principles initially formulated were analysed. The most evident conclusions are then highlighted in terms of the proposed research question.

## 3. Data analysis and discussion

After completing the evaluation process, through questionnaires and interviews, it was possible to conclude that training designed according to the needs of teachers, applied to their reality and streamlined in their workplace is beneficial for teaching practices, namely with regard to collaborative work issues, professional development and participatory reflection about the curriculum.

The school culture present in the dynamics of the educational community under study points to what Ken Haycock (Haycock, 2004) states as one of the factors that influence collaborative work. In this case, it was found that a collaboration environment prevails among the teachers of the Group, which unequivocally covers the functions and responsibilities of the teacher librarian.

It was also possible to confirm that there is a vision shared by all members of the organization (what Haycock calls purpose). The educational community is united and focused on a collaborative process, supported by the school's educational project and oriented towards professional training, with the aim of achieving better results among students, presenting a shared vision regarding the purpose that drives it. This can be seen through unanimous affirmations, such as «with a common objective for the entire Group, it makes sense for the training to be internal».

Training in small groups enhanced what Wavell (2004) calls a collaborative environment, enabling the development of skills and enhancing the characteristics of the various trainees. Despite the training objectives being transversal to all trainees, it was possible to define and adapt - session by session - the specific objectives and select the appropriate resources, thus facilitating the development of the entire process and taking care of communication among all stakeholders, contributing to greater achievement of the defined objectives.

The weekly frequency of the training also made it possible to positively influence the collaborative process, both in terms of quality and in the balance of the amount of information conveyed.

In line with what authors such as Caetano (2003) or Moreira (2004) point out, it was possible to attest several advantages of the training model used in this context. In general, respondents recognized that professional development focused on research had enabled them to understand and improve their practices based on individual and group assessment and reflection in and about everyday pedagogical action. A context was created that fostered the meeting of diverse people, with varied backgrounds, who teach different levels of education at school, but who share and are committed to a common goal, which strengthens their educational practice.

It was found that bringing together people with different perspectives, experiences and skills was an added value in the promotion of changes and innovations; interaction, dialogue and joint reflection stimulated the reflective

capacity and increased learning of all involved, conferring greater safety to the members of the groups (Boavida and Ponte, 2002:2).

The fact that the training, based on the research-action paradigm, took place in the trainees' workplace allowed teachers to «develop their competence and professionalism in contact with their peers in the workplace» (Veiga Simão, Caetano and Freire, 2007:68). In general, all participants in this study reported that they benefitted from the exchange of experiences, either by «enriching perspectives» through reflection on their practices and consequent change in them, or because they themselves share what they do and support the work of peers through self-assessment. The trainees also pointed out that the role that the trainer played as a promoter of reflective practices with the trainees was also very positive, as defended by authors such as Nóvoa (1992) and Alarcão (2001). With regard to reflection on practice as a way of evaluating the adequacy of theory, the trainees were very pleased with the essentially practical nature of the training, not forgetting to address the theory, as it was the practical part that allowed the active involvement of the teachers and enabled experiences from which it was possible to reflect, enabling a safer practice (in line with what Ponte pointed out, 2002).

They pointed out as distinctive features of this training the fact that it «starts from the reality of the school/Group», presents «times/rhythms/processes/method adapted to the trainees», there is «interaction/exchange of experiences between different areas of knowledge», has very practical features, the «greater possibility of participation», the fact that it is «directly related to the students» and «it takes place in the school».

With regard to the benefits of the training model centered on action research, it was possible to corroborate the ideas pointed out by researchers such as Rodrigues (1999; 2001), Alarcão (2001), Moreira (2001), Oliveira and Serrazina (2002), Ponte (2002) and Caetano (2003), namely regarding the development of an investigative attitude on the part of teachers and the improvement of practices by understanding their work context.

The interviewees stated that the training allowed them not only to «question the way of teaching» and the «objectives of the School», but also «to know/value the students», «to update knowledge about the project work methodology», «working according to cycles/working according to core skills/adapting the programme», «working in an interdisciplinary way» and «not being afraid to experiment». It appears, therefore, that the collaborative investigative training process is a resource for the professional development of teachers, as it allows them to «develop their competence and professionalism in contact with their peers in the workplace» (Veiga Simão, Caetano and Freire, 2007:68) and promotes autonomy in their practices.

In line with Small (2001), encouraging collaborative curricular practice was assumed as one of the primary functions of the teacher librarian, supporting the creation of a committed and strong learning community, strengthening the school's educational project and giving meaning to the school's library project. It was, therefore, gratifying to confirm that, with regard to the perception of teachers regarding the role of the teacher librarian in the professional development of teachers, the sample of the educational community under analysis recognizes that, in the school, he/she plays a dynamic role (regarding readings, training, projects, etc.). The teacher librarian is also an «aggregator» member [of the school community, in general (teachers, students, employees, parents) and of the community outside the school (other schools; networks)], acting as an «advisor» (students and teachers).

Through the analysis of the data collected, and in line with Loertscher (2000), it appears that the teacher librarian effectively puts into practice a programme that covers the areas of reading, technologies at the service of learning, information literacy and collaboration. He/she is a teacher librarian who enhances the difference in the teachers' practices and, consequently, in the students' learning. He/she has all the functions inherent to the position of teacher librarian, from the support function or support structure, to the direct intervention as effective support to the curricula. Teachers recognize that the teacher librarian «knows many people in the educational community», «is connected to a network of

schools (through the school library)» and, accordingly, can play an important role in the professional development of the teachers of the Group.

In line with what Shepherd (2004) defends, the teacher librarian of this Group of Schools presents numerous factors that enhance collaborative work, namely his/her attitude, the goals shared with the educational community, his/her vision regarding the role of the school's library, his/her communication with the community, and the availability of resources to all its members, among others. For the teachers interviewed, the common goals and objectives between teachers, school library and teacher librarian are clear, thus facilitating collaboration, since they find the will and enthusiasm to solve problems together as common denominators.

Since collaborative work is one of the primary missions of the teacher librarian, it appears that the training process based on research and reflective practices supported by scientific knowledge and by research/action/training processes among peers (as requested after a survey of the training needs of the teachers) triggered an effective concerted action between their work and that of the teacher librarian. It enabled the mobilization of knowledge and the construction of positive attitudes towards collaborative work, with a consequent impact on learning.

In the context under analysis, it appears that the interviewees recognize the librarian teacher's role in collecting, preserving and disseminating information and «promoting the potential of the school library»; but also, and above all, that of «understanding the training needs of teachers», «giving training» and/or «bringing training to the school, according to its needs».

Among the various functions inherent to the school library within the educational community, the training of teachers stands out. It is an incentive for the (self) training of teachers and a community of peer meeting and sharing, of support for the preparation of teaching and training materials.

The teacher librarian, as a partner, must be a professional who combines teacher training practices with training practices in the area of school libraries. He/she is linked to the curriculum development and professional development of teachers,

focused on the goals and interests of the institution. With this study, it was possible to confirm that the teachers interviewed share this perspective regarding the role that the teacher librarian can play as a trainer or training mediator.

Although they were not unanimous in considering that the teacher librarian, by virtue of his/her functions, has the duty to provide training or mediate it, they all share the view that he/she can offer training to school teachers, «according to their needs» and «according to the students' needs» because «he/she knows the various dimensions of the school», «has training to guide and help» and «knows the teachers' needs».

However, this «should not be his/her exclusive function». There is also no unanimity regarding the performance of a leadership role in the training of school teachers, as «leadership can be taken by any teacher in the school» and «there are other areas that can also be interesting and are not addressed by the teacher librarian».

They also state that the teacher librarian «should only take on the leadership role in his/her area/in the affairs of the School Library». However, «he/she can take on the leadership role in training with regard to the direct relationship with students» or «if he/she is a trainer and can respond to training needs». They say that the teacher librarian must train school teachers in the areas and domains «for which he/she is qualified» and «according to the teachers' needs», namely «project work», «technologies» and dissemination of the «content and potential/activities of the school library» the «area of Portuguese Language, in the domains of literacy and reading», being able «to find someone who gives training in areas in which he/she is not qualified».

Accepting that the school library is as a privileged learning centre, the teacher librarian of this Group sees teacher training as particularly relevant, namely in the field of literacies, in the area of assessment, in the development of networking and teamwork.

In line with what authors such as Roldão et al. (2000) defend, in this study it was possible to conclude that teachers consider that the impacts of ongoing

training offered by Teacher Training Centres lead to few real improvements in teaching practice because, in most cases, they are not related to the reality experienced by the trainees. It was also because of this perception that the teacher librarian of this Group of Schools chose internal training, of a collaborative nature, in which teachers who share the same difficulties and work contexts work together to find answers to the real difficulties they face.

As stated by Canário (1998; 2003), in the design of the training proposed to teachers, three principles were considered in order to include action research in a collaborative context as a training strategy. All these principles were recognized by the interviewees as an added value, starting with the training centered on the school, aiming to intervene in a problematic situation identified by the trainees and the teacher librarian in order to overcome it (in this case, it was about mastering methodology techniques project work and information literacy); the strategy included using the reflection made by the trainees about their action and connecting it to the theory; it culminated in the combination of the individual and collective aspects of training, ensured by individual intervention (observation, reflection and application), along group intervention (reflection, planning, systematization and, eventually, observation).

A primary purpose of Schools is to promote the acquisition and development of skills, including to autonomously manage the learning processes. For Figueira (2007:3), metacognition is the process that allows subjects to control their processes and mechanisms of knowledge construction. Teachers are asked to act aimed at training students in this field. It is, therefore, at school that the essential purposes of metacognition must be stimulated. In this sense, supporting the development of metacognitive skills presupposes the creation of tools that allow students to structure their ability to analyze, examine, criticize and systematize information.

It was in this context that the design of working tools was carried out with the purpose of supporting teachers in the domain of metacognitive strategies with their students, in a collaborative training context that responded to the gaps, needs and desires of teachers in the field of metacognition. Analysing the impact

of the use of the aforementioned working tools in the development of literacies and in the construction of autonomy processes, it is possible to conclude that the topics addressed in the training influenced the teachers' perspective «on the work/interaction to be done with the students» and «to understand the individual learning process».

The teachers interviewed were unanimous in stating that the working tools used allow the implementation of pedagogical differentiation strategies. They believe that these tools enable better understanding of the performance levels of each student, stating that «they help teachers to understand what each student is capable of», stressing that the «teacher-student and student-student debate» is something that enhances this knowledge. In general, they consider it important to implement metacognition strategies for the development of students' literacies, stating that when students know their way of working and their potential/difficulties, they are able to autonomously seek knowledge in other areas, inside and outside the school context.

However, with regard specifically to how the working tools allow the development of metacognition skills, the interviewees were insecure in their answers. In general, they gave imprecise answers, demonstrating lack of mastery of the very concept of metacognition. They also respond inconsistently with regard to the importance of developing metacognition strategies to foster students' autonomy. They stated that they are important but they did not gave the reasons that lead to such a statement, saying only that the «notion of how they learn best» gives students «autonomy» to «solve problems, find strategies and evaluate» situations.

The uncertainty of the interviewees regarding the way how the working instruments allow the development of the students' literacies is also evident. Some only mention that «they allow the development of reading literacy in different areas of knowledge»; others emphasize «autonomous research through work tools» and the «involvement of the various disciplines/languages» through work tools. Regarding how the use of the work tools makes it possible to put into practice the assumptions listed in the Profile of Students Leaving

Compulsory Schooling (2017), teachers were equally uncertain in their answers, showing lack of knowledge of both the document and how it relates to the training carried out. All interviewees recognize that work tools «promote personal development» and «social development», although they offer superficial explanations for these statements.

One of the reasons for the lack of mastery of these notions is related to the fact that training was interrupted due to the pandemic crisis caused by COVID-19, which forced the generalized closure of schools and, consequently, the interruption of the normal course of training, whose practical character is very strong here. This interruption took place at a crucial moment, which preceded the widespread employment of working tools that specifically aimed at the implementation and development of metacognitive strategies among students. Only two of the trainees had the opportunity to experience the whole process, since they started it in the previous school year, experimentally and individually. Still, only one of them responded to the interview. Another hypothesis that arises to obtain these results has to do with the generalized difficulty in modifying/acquiring new concepts and practices, pointed out by authors such as Niza (1999:44).

### 4. Main conclusions

In general, the results obtained in this study indicate that the objectives defended in the Learning with the School Library (2017) framework are being fully achieved by the teacher librarian in this Group, recognized by both peers and the educational community in general.

It is interesting to deepen the evaluation of the work carried out by this teacher regarding his/her role in the collaborative training that he/she started in the group under study, namely by monitoring the progress of teachers with regard to collaborative self-training practices. This is an interesting long-term study, through which a comparative analysis could be carried out between the group of trainees who underwent this training practice and a control group using other training models.

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