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Portuguese School Libraries. The design and implementation of a School Libraries Self Evaluation Model

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The School Libraries Network (SLN) was initiated under inter-ministerial initiative in 1996. It aims at creating and developing school libraries across school levels – from early learning pre-schools to secondary education - in partnership with Municipalities, Public Libraries and local education administration structures.

Since its institution in 1996, SLN supported 2058 schools, representing 95% of the total of post-elementar schools. This reach is the result of significant investment by the Ministry of Education and by the efforts of different partners committed to the development of school libraries.

To assess and acknwoledge the impact of such investment and the effective contribute of school libraries in students' achievements is therefore essential to all stakeholders. It is moreover a reality check and an evidence-based practice exercise.

Additionaly, school libraries lacked an instrument tailored to collect and use intelligence, identifying sucessful domains and actions and those requiring intervention, reform or design of transformational policies. This analysis is in itself a basic principle of good management, and a pivotal instrument for project development, contributing greatly to the wider recognition and affirmation of the school library's role within the school. The evaluation of the school library should moreover integrate the wider school self-evaluation process and it must articulate with the school's educational project.

The realization of this vision depends on a considerable number of conditions that schools must understand. Several international studies have identified them as critical success factors for the school library: co-operation and co-ordination levels between teachers and school librarians in what concerns the selection of resources and the development of activities aimed at improving student's achievements; accessibility and service quality; adequate collection and IT resources, etc (cf., for example, Londsdale, 2003; Lance & Loerstsher, 2003). These studies demonstrate that school libraries contribute decisively to teaching and learning success and that it is possible to establish a co-relation between the quality of the work developed at the school library and student's performance.

The conception of a self-evaluation model for school libraries integrated in SLN is the result of this context. It became of utmost importance to gather objective information on how school libraries develop and operate, how they contribute for effective student learning and success and for the goals of lifelong learning.

It is the result of previous study and analysis of existing models and more specifically of Portuguese schools' teaching and learning settings. We have confronted and taken into consideration previously practices and we drew from other education systems, but above all we endeavoured to develop both quantitative and qualitative approaches, focused on processes and outcomes. The model has been piloted for the first time in 2008. One hundred schools have applied the model and in 2009, 545 schools will be involved in this process.

In this paper we propose to present and analyse the model, its principles and steps leading to implementation and some results of the pilot implementation. The self-evaluation model is based on four domains which represent essential areas to the accomplishment of school libraries' teaching and learning objectives. Some of the features are characteristic of the Portuguese reality, but they are all directed towards critical teaching and learning dimensions of school libraries. Elements to be scrutinized were grouped in the following different domains: A. Supporting Curriculum Development; B. Promoting Reading and Literacy; C. Projects, Partnerships, Open-ended and Community-oriented Activities; D. School Library Management.

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