

## **Professional Paper**

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### **Title:**

Reading today: what's the meaning?

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### **ABSTRACT**

The main purpose of this paper is to discuss the meaning of reading in a global informational world. The theme will be approached within the programme of the Portuguese network of school libraries, which will be briefly presented.

The reading of fiction books is a crucial aspect of the development of all other kinds of reading; literature is essential to enrich the capacities of understanding and acting within the world and to develop literacy skills, including the informational ones. In this sense, we will discuss the importance of the development of literature collections and related activities in school libraries, while trying to answer to some key questions: how can we define the concept of *reading* well? What is a *good reader*? What kinds of reading will more easily help a child develop information skills?

In this context, we'll discuss the very activity of building and managing school library collections. What should be the weight of literature in school library collections? To which kinds of activities should the school libraries preferentially address their efforts? Should they pay more attention to literature related activities, or should they just worry with the teaching of research methods and information skills?

The points of view defended on this paper will be illustrated by some experiences led and to be led in cooperation, within the Portuguese School Libraries Network.

**KEY-WORDS:** Reading; Literacy; Literature collections; Collections building; Portuguese School Libraries Network

The main purpose of this paper is to question the meaning of reading in a global informational world. In this context, we will present the Portuguese network of school libraries, and discuss its role in the promotion of reading literacy, as a basis to develop all kinds of other literacy abilities.

Since 1996, Portugal develops a network that aims to install school libraries in schools of all levels (public schools since pre-primary to high secondary). This network intends to be a powerful tool to help creating confident readers and to play a key role in

the development of information skills and in the implementation of an information policy in schools. The Program is co-ordinated by the School Libraries Network Office in articulation with other services of the Ministry of Education and local authorities, in particular through the Public Library, allowing a real mediation, articulation and an integrated resources management, and acting as a big window to help schools, principals, teachers and pupils to find answers and share all kinds of questions and knowledge.

One of the bases of the development of this network is the belief that the development of reading abilities since the early childhood is important to succeed, not only during the period of formal education, but also in all other aspects and periods of life. Nevertheless, if this belief is nowadays a question of common sense, the role that the reading of fiction books plays in the development of other literacy capacities is still a matter of discussion.

Several sociological studies on reading habits state that school pupils and students no longer read for leisure, or even to satisfy individual curiosities, occupied as they are with obligatory school readings. In fact, it appears that the tendency to read mainly for utility spreads in children and young people as they grow old and more occupied with school activities.

Nevertheless, the reading of literature and fiction in general tends to be a way, not only to help developing a personal and social identity, but also to create more profound and grounded literacy capacities, namely the information literacy abilities that are so needed to go through life in today's world. It is of common sense that the reading (and hearing) of tales since birth is fundamental to help children grow and many authors think that their power to change our perceptions, our feelings, even our lives and consequently promote knowledge is unique<sup>1</sup>.

And here lies the question that we find so crucial to define the role of School Libraries in effectively promoting the development of reading and information skills: what does reading really mean? How can we define the concept? In which contexts can we really speak of complete reading capacities? In a world surrounded by information, a world where information is one of the grounds of the economy, young people are

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<sup>1</sup> See GAARDER, Jostein (2002) – *Books for a world without readers*. Basil: 28<sup>th</sup> Conference of the IBBY; See also PENNAC, Daniel – *Comme un roman*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992.

obliged to develop new kinds of literacy skills (since reading to visual, media, technological...). However, reading literacy is previous and transversal to all of them. Information literacy is especially relevant to allow children and young people to use effectively and critically the information and turn it into knowledge. But the main question lies *before* information literacy: how can we define the concept of *reading well*? What is a *good reader*? What kinds of reading will more easily help a child develop information skills?

These questions lead us, obviously, to more practical aspects of the school libraries management: how do we build a school library collection? What should be the weight of literature in the school libraries collections? To which kinds of activities should the school libraries preferentially address their efforts? Should they pay more attention to literature related activities, or should they just worry with the teaching of research methods and information skills?

It is in this context that this communication is built: defending the principle that literature collections are essential to enrich the capacities of understanding and acting within the world and to develop all kind of literacy skills, we will discuss the importance of the development of literature collections and related activities in school libraries. Our points of view will be supported by some experiences led and to be led in cooperation, within the context of the Portuguese School Libraries Network.