All together we can read
A story of inclusive reading in Portuguese school libraries

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Abstract:

The School Libraries Network, the National Reading Plan and the Special Needs Office of the Ministry of Education designed a joint project called "All together we can read".
This national project of inclusive reading, carried out by school libraries, began in the school year of 2011.2012, with a pilot in the Lisbon Urban Area. The fundamental cornerstone of its action is the pedagogical collaboration between teacher librarians and Special Education teachers.
School libraries play a central role as a vital resource in schools in the area of literacy, giving all the students access to books and ICT. However, having in mind the growing inclusion of students with special needs in regular schools, school libraries must respond to a school population with significantly diverse capacities, often requiring differentiated technological media of access to reading.

To develop an inclusive culture and to promote school achievement it is imperative to create reading opportunities for ALL the students, whatever their needs may be.
The main objectives of this project are: to equip school libraries with adequate resources, in different formats, accessible to students with special needs; to develop good practices in reading promotion, bearing in mind the students' individual capacities and needs.

To allow a better implementation of the project, schools are provided with several resources for the development of inclusive practices in school libraries, such as: a collection in accessible formats; educational software; supportive technologies.
A web platform was created to share strategies, activities and pedagogical materials among school libraries in the area of inclusive reading.
Since the creation of the project "All together we can read", a growing number of school clusters and their school libraries have integrated the project, thus contributing to the benefit of their students with special needs and to the civic growth of the whole community.

Keywords: school libraries, inclusion, reading, special needs, SLNP

Since the *UNESCO Convention for the Rights of Children* (1989), the aim of which was to ensure to all children the access to education without any discriminations, that the international community has been discussing the issues of access, integration and, later, the inclusion of students with special needs in regular schools.

In this context, the *UNESCO Salamanca Statement* (1994) was an essential cornerstone to the concept of inclusion, broadening it to encompass a very diverse lot of situations.

According to point 3 of the *Salamanca Statement*
> … schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups.

And further on, in point 7,
> The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities.

The *IFLA/UNESCO School Library Manifesto* also states that
> School library services must be provided equally to all members of the school community, regardless of age, race, gender, religion, nationality, language, professional or social status. Specific services and materials must be provided for those who are unable to use mainstream library services and materials.

More recently, the *Lyon Declaration on the access to information and development* (2014: 1) establishes, among others, the following principle: "Inequality is reduced by the empowerment, education and inclusion of marginalized groups, including women, indigenous peoples, minorities, migrants, refugees, persons with disabilities, older persons, children and youth."

To Sofia Freire (2008: 5),
> Inclusion is an educational movement, but also a social and political one, that defends the right of every individual to participate in a conscious and responsible way in the society he lives in [...] In education it advocates the right of all students to develop and apply their potential, as well as the necessary competences to the exercise of citizenship, through a quality education, designed taking their needs and characteristics into consideration.

School plays a fundamental role in the creation and development of an inclusive culture. The integration in regular schools of children with special needs demands quite a change in attitudes and pedagogical practice and will cause inevitable ruptures in traditional models. David Rodrigues (2006:10) says that
> Inclusive Education respects all students' cultures, capacities and possibilities of evolution. Inclusive Education bets on the school as an educational community, wants a differentiated and quality learning environment for all. It is a school that recognises differences, works with them for development and gives them sense, dignity and functionality.

Opening to the other without constraints and prejudice requires a change in the ways of thinking and feeling humanity. For the construction of citizenship in the 21st century it is mandatory to build a plural, ecumenical and complete idea of what it is to be human and to have the conscience that humanity is the centre and the foundation of civilization.

The project *All together we can read*

All together we can read is a project of inclusive reading in Portuguese school libraries and is the result of a partnership celebrated in 2011-12 between the School Libraries Network Program (SLNP) and the Services of Special Education of the Ministry of Education.

The idea at the origin of this project was to provide access to reading in school libraries, to all students, regardless of their difficulties.

This initiative started with a pilot project in five groups of schools in the metropolitan area of Lisbon and was developed on a fundamental basis: the pedagogical collaboration between teacher librarians and special education teachers.
School libraries, as a key resource to promote reading and the different literacies in the educational context, have a key role in access to books and information and communication technologies. The increasing inclusion of students with special educational needs in regular schools, require an adequate response from the education community and, in a very specific way, from the school library, since we are dealing with a population with skills and needs that require, in many situations, different means of access to reading.

The objectives of the project *All together we can read* were the following:
- To provide school libraries with adequate resources in different formats accessible to students with special educational needs;
- To develop best practices in promoting reading, taking into account the individual skills and needs of students;
- To share practices, resources and inclusive teaching materials.

To develop an inclusive culture and promote academic success, creating reading opportunities for ALL students, regardless of the needs that each may present, became the *leitmotif* of the project. It starts with the idea of integration, in order to gradually build, through reading a real inclusive culture.

The successful implementation of the project that occurred in the year 2011-12, allowed its expansion in subsequent years. This extension was achieved with the collaboration of the National Reading Plan, an inter-ministerial program of reading promotion which became a partner of the project. It also got the support of the Calouste Gulbenkian and Portugal Telelcom (PT) Foundations.

To identify the project *All together we can read*, a specific logo was created, and both the logo and the project were included in the Web page of the School Libraries Network (SLN) (http://rbe.mec.pt/np4/todos_juntos_podemos_ler.html). In addition to the publicising, some indications were given about documents in accessible formats, as well as about specific software to the project's target audience.

Application

After the successful pilot experience, the access of school clusters to the project is made by application. This occurs, on an annual basis, and is announced on the SLN website. The school clusters apply by filling in an online form, which describes the inclusive reading project they want to develop.

The design of the project, with the duration of two academic years, is based on a set of information on the ways each school intends to promote reading for students with special needs. Among the information requested, we highlight the following:
- Project objectives;
- Number of students involved;
- Actions to be developed to promote reading;
- Inclusive resources and teaching materials (existing and to purchase);
- Resources and teaching materials to be produced;
- Ways to evaluate the implementation of the project;
- Partnerships to be established;
- Project coordination and project team;
- Opinion of the management of the school cluster.

For the selection of projects a set of criteria were established, including:
- The existing collaborative work between the school library and special education teachers in promoting reading;
- The quality of the projects presented, including:
  - Consistency between the characteristics of the school population and the objectives, actions and resources defined in the project;
  - Adequacy of objectives, actions and resources to the purpose of building inclusive libraries;
  - Development of the project in different schools/ school libraries of the cluster;
  - Involvement in the project of several educational actors in collaborative practices;
  - Project degree of sustainability.

After the selection of projects that respond better to the objectives and challenges, the school clusters submit, through an online form, their resources acquisition proposals (adapted reading resources, specific software and equipment), according to the amount allocated to each project.

Between the school years 2011-2012 and 2015-2016, 72 school clusters were integrated in the project *All together we can read*, including 264 school libraries and 7 309 pupils with special educational needs:

School year	2011.2012	2012.2013	2013.2014	2014.2015	2015.2016	Total
Integrated school clusters	5	10	22	20	15	**72**
School libraries	17	41	80	73	53	**264**
Number of students	557	938	2.331	2 284	1.199	**7 309**

Implementation

When starting the implementation of the project, the team is asked to perform a diagnostic evaluation on the following aspects:
- Accessibility to the physical environment and ergonomics;
- Characterization of the students' reading habits;
- Characterization of the students involved in the project;
- Activities in the context of reading promotion for pupils with special needs carried out by the school library.

The diagnostic evaluation performed by school libraries, allows to reformulate the original project design, both in terms of accessibility of the school library to respond effectively to the target audience's needs, and in what concerns priority resources to successfully promote inclusive reading.

The School Libraries Network offers also a set of information relating to companies/ entities and promoters of reading resources that include, among others:
- Specialized bookshops;
- Inclusive documents in different formats (text in Braille, large text, printed text with Pictures Communication Symbols [PCS], texts translated into Portuguese Sign Language, audiobooks and books in Digital Accessible Information System [DAYSY] format);
- Webpages providing inclusive reading resources (ebooks in various formats)
- Companies that sell specific software for students with special educational needs;
- Free software (augmentative communication, digital accessibility, promotion of reading and writing, math skills, among others);
- Equipment for access to reading and related activities (laptops, tablets, camcorders, handles, lenses, etc.).

Resources

To respond to the audience's needs, the team responsible for the project in each cluster, prepares a selection of specific resources (documental, software and equipment), allowing each student to develop reading skills and literacy.

The school libraries included in the project have now a new set of resources:
- Documents in accessible formats: Braille books, books with printed text accompanied by PCS; multimedia books in Portuguese sign language; audiobooks; audiobooks in DAISY format; books in large text; digital books in PDF or EPUB and inclusive books of the *4 Readings collection* (printed text, PCS, Portuguese sign language and audio format).
- Specific software for the promotion of reading, writing and communication. Among the acquired software, we point out the one that was more often selected by the set of integrated libraries: Vox4all; Letters and words; EN GRID2; Continue Learning Words; Imagine create and build; Junior memory games; PT Magic Keyboard; Map of ideas.
- The selected equipment motivates students to read and develop skills in literacy, taking into account the potential of digital resources. The most used equipment is: tablets; laptop computers; touch screens; wireless headsets; adapted mouses; among others.

Partnerships

To implement the project in schools, we point out some key contributions: the support of partner organizations; the pedagogic supervision of Local Coordinators of the School Library Network; the monitoring of the coordinating services.

The partner organizations supported the the schools that joined the project in several actions, notably:
- Acquisition of specific software and equipment;
- Training of teacher librarians and special education teachers;
- Brochure publication;
- Project meetings;
- Creation and hosting of an online platform for the dissemination of resources and teaching materials.

Monitoring

The SLN Local Coordinators play a decisive role in the monitoring of the project among teacher librarians. In this monitoring we highlight the following actions:
- Project dissemination;
- Mediating between the project coordinator services and the school teams; preparing budget proposals for specific projects; accompanying project implementation; disseminating teaching materials and resources; assisting in intermediate and final evaluation moments.

The project coordinator services develop follow-up actions online and in presence, such as:
- Preparing documentation on the diagnostic evaluation and implementation of the project in the school cluster;
- Conducting visits to schools to monitor the development of projects;
- Organizing meetings for the dissemination and sharing of knowledge, experiences and resources on reading promotion and inclusion;
- Preparing intermediate and final evaluation forms;
- Preparing an assessment report, published annually and presented in the project meetings.

Social and pedagogical changes

The collaboration between teacher librarians and special education teachers has become an essential aspect of the project *All together we can read*. This highly active and constructive interaction brought very significant changes to the design and implementation of activities and to the production, dissemination and sharing of resources. This collaboration was extended in many cases to other teachers from different areas of the curriculum.

One of the most significant changes introduced by the mentioned collaborative work was the most assiduous presence of students with special educational needs in the school library. This presence allowed greater interaction of these students with their peers, creating a new attitude of citizenship, respect for diversity and inclusion. Students with special needs are no longer confined to their protected area, occupying the school library and, consequently, the broader school space.

In assessing the impact achieved by the project, teacher librarians and special education teachers, reported the following progress:
- Acceptance, appreciation and respect from peers;
- Interpersonal relationships among peers with and without special educational needs;
- Self-esteem, self-confidence and autonomy of students with special educational needs;
- Mutual assistance and cooperation between peers;
- Personal and social development;
- Awareness of the difference.

The joint activities and more assiduous presence of pupils with special needs in the library space caused also significant changes in terms of attitudes towards books and reading. The most significant changes were the following:
- Development of reading pleasure;
- Acquisition of new communication skills;
- Acquisition of new reading and writing skills;
- Increase of books borrowing in the library;
- More frequent activities in the school library;
- Higher frequency of students reading on their own;
- Increased use of school library by their own initiative.

Another change induced by the project was the creation of resources and inclusive teaching materials and the implementation of reading activities for all.

Thus a wide variety of materials were produced and activities were carried out to support and develop oral and written communication and reading skills, as for instance:
- Preparation of worksheets in PCS;
- Creation of puzzles related to stories;
- Use of web applications to build crosswords; quizzes for reading comprehension; cards to produce sequences; among others;
- Illustration of stories;
- Creation of books in various formats (ebooks, Braille, PCS, audiobooks);
- Production of subtitled videos with stories told simultaneously in Portuguese sign language and audio narration;
- Production of inclusive books in print, combining Braille text, large text and PCS;
- Creation of multisensory books;
- Puppet theater performances with the participation of ALL students;
- Creative writing workshops tailored to students with special educational needs.

The changes caused by the project *All together we can read* were very significant. The actions initially directed to students with special needs were gradually extended to all students and teachers from different subject areas. The planning of joint and systematic actions to promote reading in different contexts led to a gradual inclusion of students with special needs. Through this involvement of ALL students, regardless of their situation, a truly inclusive culture began to take form in these schools.

Dissemination and sharing

In addition to providing libraries with adequate resources to promote reading for all, and to the existence of good inclusive reading practices in school libraries, a new habit has arised

and became established: the dissemination and sharing of resources and inclusive teaching materials as well as the exchange of experiences and knowledge in the context of inclusion.

The dissemination and sharing of resources was carried out in order to promote the exchange of materials, not always easy to build. School clusters integrated in the project *All together we can read*, were invited to share online, resources and teaching materials they produced in the blogs or web pages of their school libraries. These platforms are available on the website of the School Libraries Network: http://rbe.mec.pt/np4/todos_juntos_podemos_ler.html . Here are some examples:

- School cluster of Mafra:
  http://bibliotecas-ae-mafra.webnode.pt/projeto-todos-juntos-/;
- School cluster José Cardoso Pires:
  http://bibliojcp.blogspot.pt/ ;
- School cluster of Coimbra Sul:
  http://bibliotecas-inclusivas4.webnode.pt/;
- School cluster André Soares:
  http://beandresoares.webnode.pt/todos-juntos-podemos-ler/atividades-2014-2015/

A closed and protected platform was also created to share resources and teaching materials: Sapo Campus RBE (http://rbe.campus.sapo.pt/). It is accessible to all teacher librarians and special education teachers of the schools integrated in the project and there they post lesson plans, photographs, activities and teaching materials. It was intended to create an Inclusive Reading Network.

In order to collect the resources produced by school libraries and other inclusive resources published on the Web, a free access blog was created, called Active Library, Inclusive Library (http://bibliotecaativabibliotecainclusiva.blogspot.pt/). Resources of all types and formats are available there and easily consulted by any web user.

Reasons for success

The implementation of the project *All together we can read* has performed a set of pedagogical changes in schools that promoted inclusive reading. It brought along and strengthened an inclusive culture clearly visible in the actions involving all the participants in this project:

- Diversity of activities and learning experiences;
- Articulation of the school library staff, special education teachers and other teachers in conducting reading activities;
- Inclusion of students with special needs in the class group and in the school;
- Implementation of inclusive teaching practices;
- Production and sharing of resources and teaching materials;
- More frequent use of the school library by students with special educational needs.

The changes induced by the project were enhanced by a number of factors, which were underlined by teacher librarians in the several stages of evaluation. As key factors to the success of inclusion, the following stand out:

- The diagnostic evaluation performed prior to execution of the project;
- The collaboration between teacher librarians and special education teachers;
- Rigorous selection of resources, taking into account the target audience;
- The creation of cohesive work teams;
- Coordination among all the teachers involved in the project;

- The support of school principals and management boards;
- The involvement of families;
- The establishment of effective partnerships;
- The sharing of resources;
- Teacher training in the context of inclusive reading.

The experience of these years tells us that inclusion does not happen at once, it is a reality that is built in everyday life. An utopia that comes true when learning occurs. In the words of John Beauclair, quoted by Millecamps (2010:14):

> To include is to live the beauty of diversity
> To include is a verb,
> an action, when we leave aside
> the habit of just talking
> And with love, courage
> Idealism and will,
> Pass from words to action.

Development and future perspectives

The methodology used in the project *All together we can read* to promote inclusion through reading, as well as the pro-active role of school libraries in achieving this goal, has resulted in a great interest in the subject, particularly in regional meetings on libraries and reading, promoted by school libraries across the country. In the academic year 2015-16, the project was adopted by the School Libraries Network of the Autonomous Region of Azores, where an experimental phase of implementation of the project is beginning in three schools of the island of São Miguel.

The work done in the context of inclusion of pupils with special educational needs gave rise to a new challenge: to promote the inclusion in a more comprehensive way. Inclusive library must also be a multicultural library. Promoting the meeting of cultures is not only one of the guidelines of IFLA, it is a requirement of the world we live in, particularly in Europe. Schools and school libraries are the dynamic hub of this meeting.

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