

The role of public libraries in promoting reading within the family

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Resumo

Preende-se, com esta comunicação, dar conta de alguns exemplos de boas práticas de promoção da leitura, realizadas em contexto de biblioteca pública, tendo como destinatários as famílias, em particular os pais e os filhos.

Partindo do pressuposto de que o processo de formação de leitores se inicia muito antes da entrada da criança no sistema educativo e da sua alfabetização formal e de que a família desempenha, praticamente desde o nascimento, um papel determinante na aproximação ao universo da leitura, algumas bibliotecas têm disponíveis atividades que visam aproximar pais e filhos, em conjunto, dos livros e da leitura, associando-os a atividades lúdicas, capazes de suscitar o interesse e a sensibilização precoce dos leitores. Estas atividades atuam a vários níveis, colaborando na formação dos pais ao nível da sua crescente consciencialização sobre os benefícios da leitura, a seleção de livros e obras de qualidade, fortalecendo, além disso, a relação familiar e afetiva e promovendo um crescimento mais saudável e equilibrado das crianças.

Palavras-chave

Biblioteca pública, família, literacia familiar, literacia emergente

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate some examples of good practice carried out in public libraries and their role in promoting reading within the family and in particular with parents and children. In this case, the family takes on the responsibility of bringing the book into the life of the child almost from the time they are born. Some libraries hold events which aim to bring parents and children, books and reading and ludic activities together and thus stimulate early interest in reading on the part of the child. These activities work on various levels, with a view to training parents on how to take full advantage of books, to make them more aware of the benefits of reading and how to make a good selection of reading material in order to strengthen family bonds and promote a healthier and more balanced upbringing for the child.

Keywords

Public library, family, family literacy, emergent literacy

The promotion of reading: The importance of the family unit

The process of promoting reading is gradual and occurs in different contexts (family, school and library) as a result of a variety of factors. Close and regular contact with books, particularly at home with the family, and in particular with parents (Hannon 1995, 1998; Spiegel 2001), together with ludic activities, all play an

important role in this process. The objective is to familiarise the child with books and allow them from an early age to have positive and concrete representations

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of books, which have an important impact on the child's future reading and writing skills.

It is generally accepted that these skills begin long before the child starts school and their success largely depends on previous learning experiences connected to emergent literacy (Gillen and Hall, 2003; Pressley, 1999; Sulzby and Teale, 1991; Whitehurst and Lonigan, 2001), and family literacy, which occur on an informal level or through specific programmes (Cairney, 2003; Cruz, 2011; Mata, 1999, 2006; Purcell-Gates, 2000; Villas-Boas, 2010). These experiences, which to some extent may be connected to literacy theory (Goodman, 1987), also help in the development of oral competence, including a wider and richer lexical repertoire, a grasp of complex grammatical structures, as well as increased phonological awareness and exposure to a wide range of written material. Reading activities have the ability to provide significant experiences related to books, introducing the child to the world of books and thus enhancing their awareness of different types of publications, initially through oral production (e.g. songs, rhymes, chants, tongue twisters and poems) and at a later stage, in written publications, through reading out loud. Regular storytelling by parents has a positive effect on the linguistic development of the child and provides concrete examples of how language is structured, both linguistically and in terms of narrative structure. This occurs through the association between the oral and the written word, as well as the sheer pleasure of listening to a story and the discovery of symbolic meanings of the child's mother tongue and their increasing awareness of aesthetics. Literature has the ability to provide the child with a linguistic repertoire which challenges them and motivates them to experiment with language. In cognitive terms, the relationship established between language development and organised narrative thinking is highly relevant. Narrative structures favour the acquisition and development of notions of time and of cause and effect. Many narratives for very young readers also enable the creation of familiar settings, thus establishing associations with the world around them, or clarify more abstract concepts through specific examples. Other advantages which have been widely demonstrated include increased mental awareness of the child, improved social skills and the development of their personality, a greater ability to find solutions to existential dilemmas, the development of the child's imagination and creativity, greater personal enrichment and increased contact with culture and tradition, all of which strengthen the child's identity, as well as providing entertainment and ludic representations associated with reading.

Ensuring that reading takes place in a positive and comfortable setting within the home (Poslaniec, 2004, 2006; Rigolet, 1997, 2009) is crucial; however, it is not the norm for the vast majority of children and their families. Even though the social value of reading is widely recognised and present in everyday discourse, parents are still not sufficiently aware of its advantages and often leave the development of reading skills to the schools their children attend and school and public libraries.

The mission of public libraries

'Creating and strengthening reading habits in children from an early age'. (IFLA/UNESCO, 1994)

Public libraries were created for people from all walks of life and for all generations; however, children are one of their main target audiences and libraries pay particular attention to them and develop activities which are geared towards them:

If children can be inspired by the excitement of knowledge and by works of the imagination at an early age, they are likely to benefit from these vital elements of personal development throughout their lives, both enriching them and enhancing their contribution to society. (Koontz and Gubbin 2010: 7)

The guidelines put forward by IFLA highlight the importance of motivating parents and other adults to use libraries and perceive children as decisive in the success of the libraries in their local communities.

The work carried out by libraries goes far beyond lending out books and other publications or for storing books. Their role in non-formal education and the promotion of extended literary competences have been the basis for the development of events programmes in the majority of public libraries. These activities offer children a wide range of services and publications which promote 'the enjoyment of reading and the excitement of discovering knowledge and works of the imagination' (Koontz and Gubbin 2010: 38). Research shows that inculcating reading habits from an early age is crucial and that these activities aimed at children are particularly important, especially story time.

The *Guidelines for Library Services to Babies and Toddlers* (IFLA, 2007) are even more explicit, and state that libraries should increase the number of activities they provide for children. Due to the fact that the target audience is so young, the involvement of the family or a guardian is crucial to their success, where the ludic and emotional aspect of the activities awaken curiosity and interest in the child in a variety

of ways and bring them into close contact with books and reading. The objectives of this service for children and their families are to make a wide range of publications available (not just books), promote the development of oral competence, make parents aware of the importance of motivating early reading habits through the use of specific stimuli, namely books and storytelling, promote regular use of the library and the services it offers and the building of an environment¹ (both physical and emotional) which is friendly and motivating for children and their families.

Studies² presented in recent years have shown that in Portugal public libraries play a crucial role in promoting reading and are an important complement to school when it comes to inculcating reading habits. However, a study from 2007 on promoting reading habits in children in Portugal demonstrated that only 11.4% of parents said they participated in reading activities promoted by public libraries, which is far less than attendance at other organised events to promote reading.³

Reading clubs for parents and children: An example of best practice

When images invade the intimacy of the family and substitute the word, the attitudes of adults, parents, teachers and other people who play a role in the child's life, will determine to a great extent, if the child will be a good reader in the future, or if they will be incapable of feeling the pleasure that comes from reading a good book. (García Sobrino, 2000: 44 – authors' translation)

Ílhavo Public Library (IPL) was opened in 2005 and one of its objectives has been to follow the guidelines laid down by UNESCO (IFLA/UNESCO, 1994), which state that it is important to attract readers, including children, adolescents and adults to the library. These objectives have a greater chance of success when the pleasure gained from reading and having contact with books starts at an early age, promoted by parents and nursery school staff long before children start school. This first contact with books will hopefully transform future adolescents and adults, into bona fide readers who take pleasure in reading a book.

Because IPL is a local library, it presented a project called 'Read to Grow' (RTG) in 2007 to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Its objectives were to increase library use by children, particularly pre-readers. The project revolved around children of pre-school age and aimed to promote and develop regular and ongoing contact with books and reading and to contribute to the development of competences with

the help of the people involved in the project, namely nursery school teachers, library staff and families.

During the three school years⁴ in which RTG took place on a fortnightly basis:

the library staff visit nursery schools to tell stories. The children then visit the library, accompanied by their parents, to listen to more stories. They can also take home publications provided by the library. The success of the project depends on the involvement of all the participants and on the commitment to books. (Dissemination Leaflet of the Project⁵ – authors' translation)

However, even though there was a large degree of involvement from nursery school staff and the children, facilitated by the fortnightly visits of the IPL team to the schools, and despite the reading activities developed and the gradual improvement of the classroom libraries in the schools since the beginning of the project, it was difficult to involve the families, particularly the parents. Contrary to what was initially hoped, they did not attend the library or the activities as regularly as expected.

With a view to overcoming this obstacle, on 5 April 2008, all the parents were invited to a session at IPL which aimed to provide more information about the project and during which they were asked to sign a 'Book Commitment' with the library. This document clearly puts the onus on the library, making it proactive in the development of readers and committing itself, together with the parents, to developing reading habits in the children and creating physical and emotional conditions for that relationship to grow. The library offered families involved in the Book Commitment special activities as well as special books that were reserved for them, together with formation and information regarding reading promotion habits. Out of a total of 80 families invited, 18 attended, in a session which included a dissemination/awareness activity using children's literature. However, the signing of the Book Commitment was still not enough to achieve the two main objectives of the project: to promote reading in the home, thus motivating more library lending and stimulating an appreciation of books and reading from an early age within the home.

The next step was taken on 16 May 2009, almost a year after the Book Commitment, when the IPL held its first session 'Reading and Growing Go Hand in Hand: Book Club for Parents and Children'. All the families⁶ of the 80 children registered at the local nursery schools included in the project were invited to participate in the first Book Club (BC) meeting. A total of 28 families attended the first session, where the first part dealt with issues related to children's

literature and was aimed at parents, and story time for parents and children. A Book Club Card was given to all the families with the dates of the upcoming activities and the challenge/task to be completed by the family before the following session.

In this way, Reading and Growing Go Hand in Hand: Book Club for Parents and Children was created, a monthly gathering of children between the ages of three and seven and their parents, which took place over several months with a range of different reading activities such as reading games, book talks, book presentations. Due to the large number of participants, two groups were set up who met at specific times. The meetings were held on Saturday morning at IPL and in the afternoon at the library's satellite in Gafanha do Carmo. A theme was chosen for each session and was then fully developed by the children and their parents. At the end of each session, the theme for the following session was announced and a new 'task' was given for the family to carry out before the next meeting. The task always involved the participation of the children and the adults (or family members) and revolved around children's literature and storytelling.

Throughout the five years during which the BC meetings took place, the themes covered and tasks carried out by the families in each of the two groups were wide-ranging: imagination, spring, fear, wolves, friendship, family, winter, colours, animals and the stars are just a few examples of the topics. The work done by the children and their families was presented at the BC meetings and each session started or finished with a story pertaining to the theme of the session. The pieces of work were exhibited during that month in the children's and adolescents' section of IPL until the following session. During each meeting, as well as the task card, the IPL team also prepared a selection of books related to the theme of the meeting, which families could take home. In this way, the library staff who held the sessions and maintained close contact with the families throughout the project could encourage families to lend books. Further contact with books was also promoted when the children carried out the tasks, gave reading suggestions to other BC members (e.g. at Christmas and during the holidays) and presented the books they had read during the holiday or were reading at the time.

From its inception until December 2014, a total of 49 Reading and Growing Go Hand in Hand: Book Club for Parents and Children sessions were held, with an average of 15 families per session at IPL and 12 at the library's satellite in Gafanha do Carmo (27 in total).

From the beginning of the project and the BC, the children grew and developed, as did their competences

and needs as individuals and as readers and consumers of books. As a result, to develop the project and fulfil the desire expressed by the families involved for it to continue, another BC was created, called 'Grown-up and Reading – Book Club for Parents and Children' for children aged eight to ten. It is clear that the children have grown as readers during this process, as has their constant desire to share their feelings about and relationship with books. In this way, the sessions and tasks set by this BC demanded greater involvement with books. Since September 2011, a total of 30 sessions have been held with 11 families participating in the activities promoted by the library. In total, around 30 families are involved in the project activities each year.

Conclusion

It is widely accepted that children's performance and their success in terms of reading and writing largely depend on their social and economic class, where such factors as their parents' qualifications, their attitudes towards education and their expectations with regard to their children, as well the presence of books and other reading material in the home play an important role. In the case of the project presented in this paper, it included families from different socio-economic backgrounds with a wide range of reading practices. If it is not possible to change the qualifications of the children's parents, or their social background, it is certainly possible to intervene in terms of the participants' expectations and the representations they have about books and reading. This will hopefully increase family dialogue, the number of cultural activities the family attend and the participation of parents in reading activities with their children (Bus, 2001 and Haney and Hill, 2004) such as storytelling, all of which are important for the development of basic reading and writing competences (Viana and Teixeira, 2002).

The children involved in this project were not subjected to formal assessment, so as a result we cannot show any concrete improvements in terms of their reading competences. Nevertheless, there are many reports from children and teachers about the special bond between the participants and books. The project aimed to promote competences in emergent literacy, particularly in the pre-reading group, especially in terms of motivation, oral language development, the construction of positive and concrete representations and meaningful experiences related to books and reading. The BC meetings provided a wide range of contexts and experiences which allowed the children to develop their oral competence and apply it in

concrete situations. The opportunity to discuss and share opinions and points of view occurred on a regular basis, with the objective of stimulating specific relevant lexical areas, particularly those related to the world around the child (e.g. colours, animals, letters, clothes, parts of the body and toys).

The underlying principle on which the project is based is continuity and the creation of specific group dynamics, including a shift in the traditional perception of the library, which has become a personal and familiar place for the children and their families. The bonds of empathy between the members of each group and the library staff create opportunities for further reading suggestions and recommendations, even outside the time slots for the formal reading sessions. However, possibly its greatest impact is on the family itself, creating enriching experiences which revolve around books and parents reading more to their children.

Contact with books occurred in every session, as well as the sharing of the children's reading experiences with their family at home. Reading and writing were given added importance in the meetings and the children were encouraged and praised when they took books home and gave their opinions on the books they had read. The creation of an enriched literary setting within the context of the library, and by extension in the home, promotes reading and positively reinforces these activities, which are associated with pleasure, well-being, emotions and play, creating habits which will hopefully encourage the gradual and long lasting development of reading habits, very often before children have been exposed to books at school.

This project has clearly had a positive impact on the local community, creating loyal library members of different generations and generating an enthusiastic response from them.

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Notes

1. See Ramos, 2012.
2. Compare with Neves et al (2008).
3. Compare with the following results 'range of appropriate books available (76%), initial contact with books through the "toy book" (73%), reading books to children before have even learnt to read (70%); events which have been reasonably well attended: Recommend that time is set aside to read (56%) and Talk to them about the books they read (51%) and lastly, events which have been poorly attended: Take them to bookstores (23%), Participate in programmes organised by

- schools to promote reading (21%), Take them to libraries/media libraries (15%)' (Santos, 2007: 198).
4. 2007/2008, 2008/2009 and 2009/2010.
5. More detailed information about the project, including an overview and analysis, are available at http://195.23.38.178/casadaleitura/portalpha/bo/documentos/proj_crescer_a_2.pdf.
6. By family, we mean a child accompanied by at least one adult family member, in most situations by parents or grandparents. In total, this year (2014/2015) 32 families are participants of the project, divided into 3 different clubs.

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