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Leveraging new knowledge with relational capabilities

An investigation of rural school libraries in southern Portugal

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to identify and conceptualize a set of relational capabilities that school libraries in the Alentejo region of Portugal develop for acquiring new knowledge that exists externally in the wider community.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative research design operationalized via case studies was followed for the empirical analysis. Empirical findings are based on the analysis of the 84 narrative reports submitted by school libraries as part of a national performance evaluation exercise that took place between 2010 and 2012. Data analysis followed the techniques of inductive data categorization, within case-analysis, and cross-case analysis.

Findings – The exploration of the relational capabilities that school libraries in the Alentejo region of Portugal develop for acquiring new knowledge that exists externally in the community resulted in the identification of relationships that school libraries in the region have established to acquire new knowledge: connecting with and supporting organizations committed to civic engagement; facilitating discussions about challenging issues through strategic partnerships; convening community conversations to identify shared concerns and solutions; and embracing local culture to foster endogenous development.

Originality/value – The ability to seek and recognize the value of new and external knowledge, assimilate it and apply it to organizational ends has been traditionally linked to the concept of absorptive capacity. While absorptive capacity literature in business settings is prolific, literature that focuses on school libraries' ability to identify and explore external knowledge and applying it to improve their performance is scarce. Focusing on the specific context of the Alentejo region of Portugal as an archetypical rural area, this paper identifies how knowledge existing externally in the community is absorbed by rural school libraries through specific relational capabilities that reflect school libraries' community orientation and engagement in participatory processes that develop social resilience.

Keywords Absorptive capacity, Social capital, School libraries, Alentejo region of Portugal, Community orientation, Relational capabilities

Paper type Research paper



1. Introduction

Rural regions are typically characterised by a number of defining features that transcend the spatial dimension (Bosworth, 2012). These features that the collective imagery tends to ascribe to rurality include the relative inaccessibility of goods (Smailes, 2002), a diminished existence of services and infrastructure, youth out-migration (Commins, 2004) and the existence of pockets of economic deprivation (Bosworth and Willett, 2011).

Precisely in response to these contextual limitations, rural regions proactively develop adaptation strategies (Roberts and Townsend, 2016), which draw upon some of the traditional rural strengths, namely, the density of networks and connections as compared with urban contexts (Hofferth and Iceland, 1998), a stronger sense of community and social cohesion based on higher levels of trust (Shucksmith *et al.*, 1996) and a greater predisposition for engaged civic participation (Dale and Onyx, 2005).

Rural public libraries have been acknowledged as leading actors for the mobilisation of such adaptation strategies. On the one hand, public libraries are valued as community assets (Oliphant, 2014). On the other hand, they contribute to community development, as they cultivate “relationships with community developers and other community agencies” (Hancks, 2012), and they “engage talent [and] gather resources” (White, 2014).

Although substantial empirical research on rural public libraries has been oriented towards exploring how libraries strengthen social capital (Bourke, 2005; Johnson, 2010, 2012; Varheim, 2007, 2009; Varheim *et al.*, 2008), much less attention has been paid to the context of rural school libraries local (Dent, 2006; Le Roux and Hendrikz, 2006; Mellon, 1992; Saitis and Saiti, 2004) or indeed to investigating the reverse side of the matter, i.e. the organisational routines and processes through which rural school libraries identify new knowledge existent in the community, and then acquire it, assimilate it and apply it to the pursuit of its organisational mission – or in other words, rural school libraries’ absorptive capacity.

An investigation of this kind is particularly timely considering that rural regions’ permeability to innovation is highly dependent on actors who activate “the critical interactive processes of promoting, creating and/or managing the formal and tacit knowledge needed” for innovation (Esparcia, 2014). School libraries perform this role as, amongst other critical functions, they:

- operate as a hub for the creation and dissemination of culture;
- implement initiatives that contribute to the continuous development of the community (competence development, project support, etc.);
- facilitate initiatives and cooperation; and
- provide a learning environment where the working tools, materials and services enable active and independent study (Boelens, 2012).

More recently, IFLA’s (2015) revised school library guidelines emphasise the leadership role played by school libraries in transferring knowledge in ways that are meaningful to communities, more specifically the cultivation of identity and a sense of belonging as “essential components to literacy and learning achievement”.

Focusing on the specific context of the Alentejo region – an extensive rural territory in the South of Portugal – the research reported in this paper investigates how knowledge existing externally in the community is absorbed by rural school libraries

that operate as local innovation systems. Implicit to this notion of local system is the understanding that the development of innovation is contingent on the range of activities engendered by actors who produce and transfer knowledge, as well as on the development of networks that operate as territorially based collective learning systems (Asheim *et al.*, 2011).

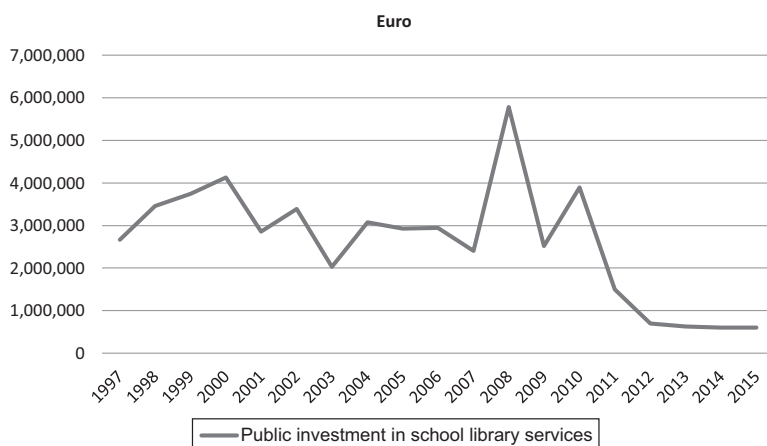
Similarly, the conception of innovation presented in this paper draws from Van de Vrande *et al.* (2009) and refers to the ways in which knowledge is dynamically transferred to local systems – a process that is not linear and depends on actors' combination of the knowledge they have at their disposal or on knowledge that they obtain from other resources. Being inherently a social process implies that the innovation process is also highly dependent on a variety of regional actors that have multiple formal and informal relationships (Camagni, 1991). It is also deeply related to regional actors' ability to generate, access and transform knowledge (Camagni and Capello, 2002; Esparcia, 2014), and to the existence of structures that govern the processes of knowledge generation and dissemination (Guillaume and Doloreux, 2011).

From this follows that particular attention should be devoted to investigating the role played by relational capabilities, as regions' permeability to innovation (Cappellin, 2000, 2007) depends on networking and on social interaction that enables "the formal and tacit knowledge needed for the good performance of local systems" (Esparcia, 2014).

Different capabilities frameworks and approaches have been developed by welfare economics theorists such as Sen (1989, 1993) and Nussbaum (2000). However, the focus of the study reported in this article is on organisational management, more specifically the management of school libraries. Consequently, the welfare economics assertion of capabilities – and its related literature – is not explored in depth here. Notwithstanding, we follow Sen's (1999) argument that societal development requires the continuous expansion of individual and collective capabilities, i.e. the ensemble of aspirations and possibilities illuminating what individuals are potentially able to do and to be. Amongst the range of capabilities is the dimension of interpersonal relationships, which contributes to the continuous transformation of social structures and institutions.

Accordingly, the main aim of this paper is to gain a better understanding of the types of relational capabilities school libraries develop to enable innovative practice in rural settings. We do this through an empirical case study that inductively identifies the relational capabilities that school libraries in the Alentejo region of Portugal develop for acquiring new knowledge that exists externally in the community. In this view, understanding the relationships that school libraries develop with the place where they are embedded is fundamental for the definition of common goals and collective innovation outcomes.

Portuguese school libraries are developed and administered by the School Libraries Network (SLN) – a government agency affiliated with the Ministry of Education and established in 1996 with the objective of equipping primary, basic and secondary schools with state-of-the-art school libraries to benefit the student population aged between 3 and 17 years. Since the inception of SLN and until 2015, the overall investment in the development of school libraries in Portugal amounts to more than €49m (vide Figure 1), which resulted in the establishment of more than 2,400 school libraries throughout the territory, 204 of which are located in the Alentejo region (vide Table I).



Source: School Libraries Network (2015)

Figure 1.
Public investment in
school library
services 1997-2015

Region	Libraries
Alentejo	204
Algarve	150
Centro Region	454
Lisbon and Tagus Valley	779
Norte Region	849
Total	2,436

Table I.
School libraries
regional distribution

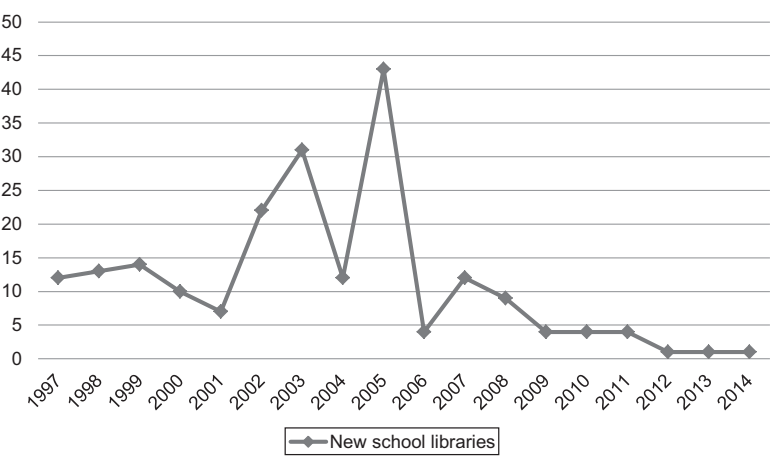
Source: School Libraries Network (2015)

Looking at how the development of school libraries in the region progressed, the greatest expansion occurred between 2002 and 2005, with peaks in 2002 and 2005 when 31 and then 43 new school libraries were created, respectively (Figure 2). In 2014, the network of school libraries in the region reached completion. By this date, the Alentejo region's total student population comprised 99,473 students (Statistics Portugal, 2014) – all of which benefited from school library services.

Because of being a vast territory, yet scarcely and sparsely populated, the Alentejo region concentrates a high number of small-sized schools, many of which lack adequate accommodation for the establishment of a school library. This justifies the fact that only 54,964 students attend a school that is equipped with a school library (Figure 3), with the remaining student population accessing school library services such as inter-school loans and travelling information resources collections. These services are provided by school clusters (administrative units aggregating a group of schools) and are managed by school librarians.

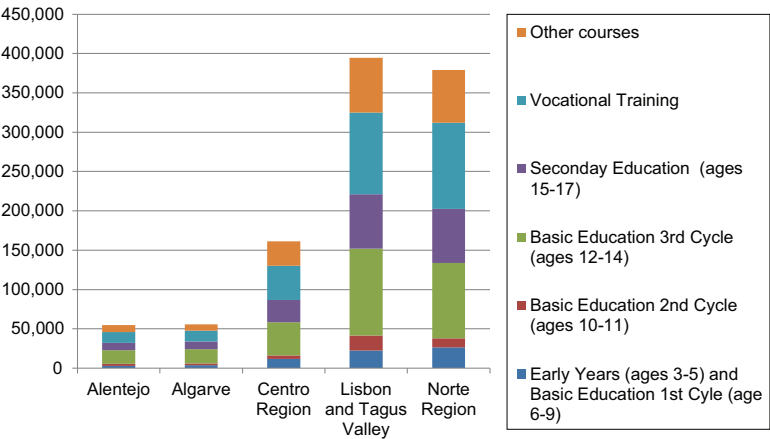
The minimum initial collection for schools includes 12 information resources per student, comprising books (75 per cent), online subscriptions, multimedia materials and associated equipment. In addition to this, thanks to the Technological Plan (Pereira and Pereira, 2015), all Portuguese public schools have been equipped with state-of-the-art

Figure 2.
Evolution of new
school libraries
established in
Alentejo 1997-2014



Source: School Libraries Network (2015)

Figure 3.
Number of students
attending a school
equipped with a
school library



Source: School Libraries Network (2015)

information and communication technology infrastructure, and every student has been allocated a laptop with access to the internet.

From an organisational perspective, SLN operates as a network composed of a multi-disciplinary steering committee that defines policy and operational standards, and a team of inter-municipal advisors who monitor policy implementation in the field and ensure compliance with the technical specifications of school library management, such as accommodation, equipment and documental procurement, as well as with specific pedagogical guidelines (Conde *et al.*, 2012; School Libraries Network, 2013). School librarians also liaise with the network of public libraries that offer complementary services. In Alentejo alone, there are 46

public libraries, which target a more diverse range of users ([Portuguese Public Library Network, 2016](#)).

Since 2009, school libraries are staffed with school librarians, who are qualified teachers that receive complementary specialised training in school librarianship through continuing professional development or recognised postgraduate-level education. They are appointed for a minimum period of four years, and their main role is integrating the school library into the pedagogical and curricular activities of the school, particularly in the domains of reading promotion, reading skills, information literacy and digital skills.

In the following section, the key elements for the theoretical framework of the study are presented, with special emphasis given to libraries' community orientation, social capital and community resilience and absorptive capacity. Section 3 briefly presents the research setting and design. Subsequently, Section 4 identifies the relational capabilities used by school libraries to leverage new knowledge existent in the community. Finally, Section 5 provides a discussion of implications for theory and practice, and a summary of the main conclusions.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical conceptualisation of libraries in the rural context as developers of relational capabilities requires an understanding of their ability to operate as arenas where we meet and are exposed to people who hold different backgrounds and values ([Audunson, 2005](#)). Although this metaphor alludes to libraries, creation of bonding, bridging and being a place for all ([Hillenbrand, 2005a, 2005b](#)), it is helpful to decompose it into three main areas of contribution:

- (1) libraries as promoters of civic culture ([Kranich, 2010](#));
- (2) libraries as promoters of community building ([Aabo *et al.*, 2010](#); [Marcum, 1996](#));
and
- (3) libraries as promoters of openness to diverse ideas ([Varheim *et al.*, 2008](#)).

2.1 Libraries' community orientation

Library community orientation reflects a paradigmatic shift from the traditional view of libraries as knowledge and information providers to working in partnership with communities in the service decision-making process. This implies conceptualising the library as a civic information centre and as a partner in the delivery of public interest services ([Kranich, 2005](#)). Consequently, the library becomes a public space, where community information is used to exercise citizenship and a fuller engagement ([Schull, 2004](#)), and where citizens work together on personal and community problems ([Hillenbrand, 2005a, 2005b](#)). From the perspective of service provision, this requires entrepreneurial librarians, who are prepared to act as resourceful and relationship-oriented civic agents ([Willingham, 2008](#)).

More recently, [Sen \(2014\)](#) conceptualised community orientation as a form of market orientation, in combination with other strategic orientations (e.g. service orientation, innovation orientation, brand orientation, entrepreneurial orientation, etc.) that combine to add value for the library, managers, users and community partners.

2.2 Social capital and community resilience

Social capital is an important theoretical lens to frame the role played by social variables in rural development (Lee *et al.*, 2005; Shucksmith, 2000; Sobels *et al.*, 2001). Some authors conceive it as an ensemble of shared norms and values of trust and reciprocity (Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 1993), whereas others conceptualise it as an individual asset mediated by social networks and interactions, that actors use to access resources (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990). However, both assertions of the term are in agreement concerning the role social capital plays in engendering change and promoting local development (Rydin and Holman, 2004; Woolcock, 1998).

Rural communities are experiencing several fronts of change that are a consequence of global problems such as cycles of economic downturn, generalised public spending cuts and an ageing population (Steiner and Atterton, 2015; Steiner and Cleary, 2014). The capacity of these regions to respond and reorganise is often acknowledged to depend on community resilience, i.e. “the existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterised by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise” (Magis, 2010).

Consequently, building community resilience requires social capital and participatory processes – events, meetings, etc. – by which community members actively identify solutions to their challenges (Plodinec *et al.*, 2014). The community orientation of libraries is aligned with the development of these interpersonal links that enhance community confidence and capacity. Of particular relevance is the establishment of different typologies of networks:

- intragroup networks;
- intergroup networks; and
- collaborative networks comprising associations and public and private institutions (Svendsen, 2013).

2.3 Absorptive capacity

Absorptive capacity refers to organisations’ ability to recognise the value of external knowledge, assimilate it, transform it and produce an organisational capability (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Zahra and George, 2002). Unsurprisingly, absorptive capacity ranks highly amongst the factors that the innovation and strategic management literature identify as impacting organisational performance (Lane *et al.*, 2006; Volderba *et al.*, 2010), as it enables the extraction of external knowledge as input for the development of new products and services.

The concept of absorptive capacity originated in the field of macroeconomics. However, it is particularly relevant for small- and medium-sized organisations that operate with limited resources (Ortega-Argiles *et al.*, 2009), reduced R and D capacity (Sptihoven *et al.*, 2010), low levels of managerial attention (Jones *et al.*, 2010) and fewer staff (Raymond *et al.*, 2001).

To overcome these liabilities, organisations rely on the establishment and cultivation of networks (Groen *et al.*, 2008; Street and Cameron, 2007). However, to capture value from networks, a combination of both strong- and weak-ties network relationships is required (Capaldo, 2007; Hansen, 1999; Obstfeld, 2005; Reagans and McEvily, 2003; Tivans, 2008). Weak ties are commonly characterised by sparse

interactions, devoid of reciprocity and low on trust and emotional commitment between the parties. These are threats to capturing value (Granovetter, 1973), notwithstanding that weak ties contribute to accessing knowledge that is not part of the firm's knowledge base.

Strong ties, on the other hand, are trust-based, emotionally invested (Gulati, 1995) consolidated collaborative routines that facilitate the exchange of more than simple and codified knowledge – they are ideally suited to exchange complex and more tacit knowledge (Hansen, 1999), which latter is required for the acquisition of competitive capabilities (McEvily and Marcus, 2005) and for the development of innovations (Zollo *et al.*, 2002).

Given that organisations' absorptive capacity entails on a first instance the ability to acquire and recognise knowledge (Todorova and Durisin, 2007; Zahra and George, 2002), i.e. a sense-making ability that allows them to analyse, process, interpret and understand context-specific knowledge from external sources, it becomes critically important to understand firms' specific relational capabilities to “collaborate with other, diverse organisations”, within an innovation system.

Ngugi *et al.* (2010) put forward a useful contribution to synthesising the different dimensions that are confluent in relational capabilities:

- the technological relational ability that materialises in the joint identification of technology requirements and in cross-functional product development teams;
- the human relational capability that reinforces equality in the design and management of cooperative relationships, and that is a precursor of interactive learning;
- the managerial systems-based relational capability that comes into play with the establishment of structures and strategies that foster the creation and absorption of knowledge; and
- the cultural relational capability that relies on the ability to build a shared culture as an enabler of co-creation opportunities.

In the innovation literature, the biotechnology sector traditionally stands as a good example of how firms successfully collaborate to acquire knowledge resources through maximising the opportunities for knowledge spillovers (Owen-Smith and Powell, 2004; Swan *et al.*, 2007). This requires continuous open channels and fluent relationships (Salman and Saives, 2005) that are generally more trust-based and consequently more amenable to providing access to expertise without the costs and strains of managing formal alliance partnerships (Liebeskind *et al.*, 1996).

In the context of small- and medium-sized firms, Lorenzoni and Lipparini (1999) demonstrated how relational capabilities entail the establishment of interactive networks with a view to establishing and enhancing a firm's resource base. Their study of the establishment of long-lasting relationships between lead firms in the Italian packaging machinery industry and the key suppliers is illuminating concerning the positive impact of relational capabilities on new knowledge acquisition, and further studies that followed reaffirmed the positive effect of relational capabilities on innovation performance (Fitjar *et al.*, 2013; Weissenberger-Eibl and Schwenk, 2009; Zollo *et al.*, 2002).

By extending this theoretical lens to the practice of libraries, this paper investigates how school libraries in the Alentejo Region of Portugal acquire knowledge resources through maximising the opportunities for knowledge spillovers, resonating with conversation theory (Lankes, 2008), and with an understanding of the library as conversation (Lankes *et al.*, 2007), and as a crucial node in participatory networks.

3. Methodology

The research reported in this paper takes a context-centric perspective (Freeman, 1987; Saxenian, 1996). In accordance with this perspective, school libraries in the Alentejo region of Portugal were chosen as the empirical setting. Alentejo is an archetypical southern European rural area. Historically, and until the mid-1980s, it was characterised by *latifundismo*, an agricultural system based on the intense exploitation of human labour, where the employment alternatives are limited, and where land ownership is limited to a minority (Do Carmo, 2010).

Today, Alentejo is the largest Portuguese region with a territorial area that is equivalent to approximately one-third of the country territory. Conversely, it has the lowest population density among the Portuguese regions – it is home to approximately 0.8 million inhabitants. It is traditionally an extensive rural territory (European Commission, 2015).

Because of the exploratory nature of the topic, a qualitative research design operationalised via case studies was followed for the empirical analysis. The empirical findings presented in the subsequent section are based on the analysis of narrative reports submitted by school libraries as part of a national performance evaluation exercise. The evaluation of Portuguese school libraries' performance is coordinated by the Ministry of Education. It develops via a structured exercise comprising several core domains:

- supporting curriculum and development;
- school library management;
- projects, partnerships, open-ended and community-oriented activities; and
- reading and literacy (Conde *et al.*, 2011).

These core domains provide a framework for pedagogical regulation and action. They are accompanied by a set of critical success factors that guide schools in achieving the best possible performance. A battery of qualitative and quantitative evidence collection techniques (e.g. analysis of strategic planning documents, meeting logs, statistics and records, observation logs, interviews, questionnaires, narrative reports) is also available to determine performance levels (Martins and Martins, 2012).

To inductively extract relational capabilities that school libraries in Alentejo develop for acquiring new knowledge that exists externally in the community, we analysed the narrative reports submitted by 84 school libraries (out of 201) between 2010 and 2012 and focusing specifically on the core domain “open-ended and community-oriented activities”.

The narratives were particularly helpful to “infer explanations for participants' goals or the underlying motivations that drive behavior” (Martins and Canhoto, 2015). In total, we analysed the 84 narrative reports submitted across the three-year period.

Data analysis followed the techniques of data categorisation (iterations of coding in order to identify patterns and themes), within case-analysis and cross-case analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). More specifically, drawing on Eisenhardt and Martin's (2000) view of dynamic capabilities as being idiosyncratic yet amenable to the identification of commonalities across organisations' routines, the study operated by initially performing within-case analysis to identify library-specific routines that are related to the processes of identifying and leveraging new knowledge. Subsequently cross-case analysis was used to identify commonality patterns in the routines previously identified, with a view to inductively extracting a set of relational capabilities.

4. Relational capabilities as a source of new knowledge

Table II presents the capabilities that could be identified across the narrative reports. The number between brackets identifies how many times instances indicative of the presence of the specific relational capability have been identified. Each relational capability is illustrated with quotations extracted from the reports.

"Connecting with and supporting organisations committed to civic engagement" refers to the realisation that the leveraging of school libraries' education capacities with a view to reducing social apathy and disenfranchisement, broadening participation

Relational capability	Illustrative narrative
Connecting with and supporting organizations committed to civic engagement (80) Facilitating discussions about challenging issues through strategic partnerships (76)	"Cante Alentejano choral groups were brought in to perform with year 4 students and explain how the genre affirms a sense of identity and an emotional link with the region (. . .)" ^a "A group of local amateur meteorologists visited to school library to help students build amateur weather stations. Making the weather stations provided an opportunity for those that don't normally use the library to develop a deeper and more engaged understanding of weather-related curriculum topics. Participants in this activity learned about climate change by discussing, making and experimenting"
Convening community conversations to identify shared concerns and solutions (68)	"In cooperation with the local council the school library launched a youth participatory budgeting process, which allowed youth groups to propose ideas for improving the community, develop those ideas into concrete proposals, and finally vote on the best proposals to be funded"
Embracing local culture to foster endogenous development (65)	"The harvest season was celebrated with a festival in which a variety of wine-related professionals were invited to speak to our high school students about the economic impact of the wine industry in the region" ^b

Notes: ^aCante Alentejano is a genre of traditional polyphonic singing endogenous to Alentejo. Very frequently its lyrics explore the themes of rural life, and UNESCO (2015) describes it as "a fundamental aspect of social life throughout Alentejano communities, permeating social gatherings in both public and private spaces". In the years that lead to its inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, local communities played an active role in keeping it alive and meaningful to younger generations; ^bAlentejo is one of the country's most successful wine production regions with a high rate of exports, and a related, emergent enotourism sector

Table II.
Summary of
relational capabilities

skills and reinforcing the identity of the community requires a combination of skills, values and motivation.

“Facilitating discussions about challenging issues through strategic partnerships” refers to the role of school libraries as conversation starters. School libraries define for themselves the mission of facilitating action through engaging appropriate individuals and institutions in regular dialogue. Very frequently, this will involve an agenda-setting ability, i.e. a profound knowledge of community stakeholders and the scanning of the issues that affect the community’s well-being.

“Convening community conversations to identify shared concerns and solutions” follows on naturally from the previous relational capability but is temporally focused into envisioning the future. In this sense, it attempts to capture prospective knowledge that can help to shape the vision for a community, which involves strategic planning and working closely with local authorities for consultations with youth groups.

Finally, “Embracing local culture to foster endogenous development” refers to the exploitation of cultural diversity for rural development. More specifically, it encapsulates traditional products and production methods that have an exploitable instrumental value and that simultaneously define territorial identity, from a representational point of view.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The exploration of the relational capabilities that school libraries in the Alentejo region of Portugal develop for acquiring new knowledge that exists externally in the community resulted in the identification of relationships that school libraries in the region have established to acquire new knowledge:

- connecting with and supporting organisations committed to civic engagement;
- facilitating discussions about challenging issues through strategic partnerships;
- convening community conversations to identify shared concerns and solutions; and
- embracing local culture to foster endogenous development.

From a theoretical point of view, the relational capabilities identified contribute to existent rural development analytical frameworks such as the rural web, which [Ploeg *et al.* \(2008\)](#) define as “a complex of internally and externally generated interrelationships that shape the relative attractiveness of rural spaces, economically, socially, culturally, and environmentally”. The constitutive elements of the rural web are an ensemble of activities, individuals, processes and resources that converge with the kind of multi-actor conglomerate that relational capabilities capture.

From the perspective of librarianship practice, the relational capabilities identified suggest that school libraries embedded in the Alentejo region of Portugal are committed to the proactive expansion of the scope of knowledge acquisition through an increasing level of multiplexity ([Bojica and Estrada, 2014](#)) that mitigates the potentially negative effects of overembeddedness ([Masciarelli *et al.*, 2010](#)). However, the multiplexity of relational networks poses problems to the operational context of these school libraries, where typically only the school librarian addresses the search–transfer problem and is in the position to control the alliance portfolio. It is therefore suggested that rural school libraries facing a similar multiplexity of networks embrace the concept and practice of alliance portfolio management ([Wassmer, 2010](#)), which will require identifying structures

or mechanisms that allow, amongst other activities, learning from previous alliance experiences, the institutionalisation of particular experiences and the provision of alliance training. This is certainly an area for policy intervention and indeed several OECD countries have recognised the need to support the resilience of communities through increasing their self-reliance and sustainability (OECD, 2015). An absence of policies and infrastructure will make rural areas more vulnerable (Bain and McLean, 2012), whereas only the intensification of networks and flows of knowledge at regional level will help retain and sustain creative talent (Gibson, 2012; Roberts and Townsend, 2016; Thomas *et al.*, 2013). Through enacting a range of relational capabilities, school libraries act as a bridge.

It is argued in the sustainable rural development literature that high levels of social capital enable communities' easier coordination to achieve mutual benefits and enhanced social cohesion (Gobattoni *et al.*, 2015). In the rural context, school libraries are a crucial node for the creation of innovation mechanisms that may trigger a collective learning system (Asheim *et al.*, 2011), as the reinforcement of community relationships increases social capital – via the activation of a region's history, culture and traditions, strengthens locals' sense of place, and invites them to act on the community, making it more adaptive and resilient.

Considering that the school and the school library are important enablers of rural area residents' contact with society, culture and informal learning opportunities (Falk and Dierking, 2010; Mardis, 2013), the relational capabilities identified in this article position school libraries in rural areas as key brokers in establishing and maintaining relations between people and institutions that would otherwise be more disconnected. School libraries cultivate a collaborative stance that besides being focused on student achievement is also actively targeting community leadership strategies (Harmon and Schafft, 2009) that approach the transformation of rural areas through innovation in areas of regional strengths.

Indeed the relational capabilities identified involve the mobilisation of stakeholders to build on local resources. When considered in a policy context, these findings strengthen the role played by school libraries in identifying the knowledge-based development potential of rural regions, particularly as it widely recognised that “most of the knowledge needed to fully exploit the growth potential of a place [...] is not readily available” (Barca *et al.*, 2012). Future research might pursue this line of inquiry and produce a more fine-grained analysis of how school libraries contribute to shaping rural regions' collective territorial discovery, in particular through determining whether some school libraries are more active in connecting to external knowledge, whether some school libraries/school librarians hold more social capital than others and how school librarians build on personal and professional connections to establish bridges.

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