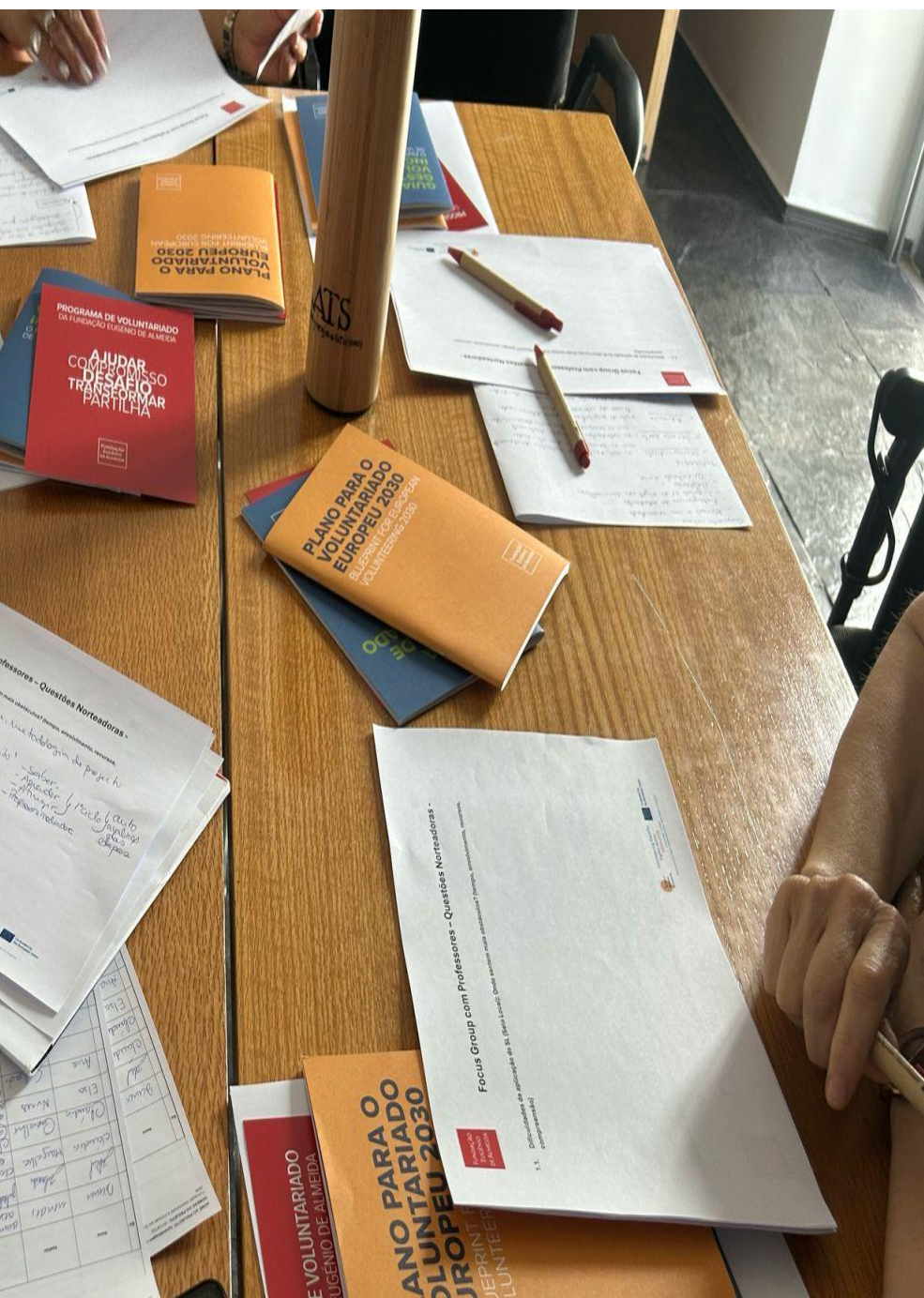


VOLUNTEERING IN ALENTEJO CENTRAL: REPORT

SKILLS VALIDATION AND SERVICE-LEARNING FOR ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

VERSÃO 0 | V&E STRAND - OUTPUT A



Índice

1. Introduction: What is Service-Learning and What is the Regional Outlook?....	2
2. The Central Paradox: Widespread Practice, Unknown Methodology	2
3. Teachers' Perspective: Pedagogical Potential vs. Structural Barriers	3
3.1. Strengths: The Recognized Impact on Learning and the Community.....	3
3.2. Weaknesses: Challenges that Limit Practice	3
4. The Students' Perspective: Motivation to Help vs. Barriers to Action	4
4.1. What Motivates Students to Participate?	4
4.2. What Prevents Students from Participating?.....	4
5. The Role of Organizations and the Way Forward.....	5
6. Conclusion: Transforming Potential into Coordinated Action	5
Bibliography.....	6
Referências	8

ACRONYMS

SL – Service-Learning

1. Introduction: What is Service-Learning and What is the Regional Outlook?

Service-Learning (SL) is a pedagogical methodology that intentionally integrates community service with curricular content. Its approach differs from traditional volunteering, which is often based on a predominantly welfare-oriented and charitable relationship, by seeking to “benefit both those who provide the service and those who receive it in a balanced way.” In this model, students apply what they learn in real-world contexts to respond to specific needs, while the community benefits from their service and involvement.

This summary aims to synthesize the main conclusions of an in-depth study that surveyed the perceptions of teachers, students, and third sector organizations in Central Alentejo. By analyzing their experiences, the study identifies the main opportunities and structural challenges for the implementation and expansion of school volunteering in the region. The analysis reveals a fundamental paradox that defines the current state of this practice in the territory.

2. The Central Paradox: Widespread Practice, Unknown Methodology

The most striking conclusion of the study is the existence of a significant dissonance: although the principles and activities associated with Service-Learning are widely practiced intuitively in schools and communities in Central Alentejo, the formal methodology is largely unknown to all stakeholders.

This lack of knowledge is widespread and quantifiable:

* Teachers: An overwhelming majority demonstrate a lack of knowledge about the methodology.

* 61.22% of teachers show a “lack of knowledge” about what SL is.

* 75.51% say they have no experience with its formal implementation.

* Students: About 70% of students are unaware of the concept, even when they actively participate in projects that fit perfectly within its definition.

* Organizations: In the third sector, 70% of partner organizations have no experience with SL, even though 90% already develop projects with volunteers on a regular basis.

This lack of a formal framework and common language prevents the transition from “isolated action based on individual initiatives to educational action integrated into the school's educational project.” It is, therefore, the main cause of the structural challenges that limit the potential of school volunteering in the region. This reality is particularly visible from the perspective of teachers, who are at the forefront of its implementation.

3. Teachers' Perspective: Pedagogical Potential vs. Structural Barriers

Teachers in Central Alentejo recognize the enormous pedagogical and civic value of Service-Learning, identifying its potential to transform both student learning and the community itself. However, they face significant structural obstacles that prevent its widespread and sustainable practice.

3.1. Strengths: The Recognized Impact on Learning and the Community

Teachers identify three major areas of positive impact that validate the effectiveness of the methodology:

1. **Student Leadership and Holistic Development:** SL is seen as a powerful tool for promoting autonomy, critical thinking, and problem-solving. By placing students as agents of change, the methodology develops essential social-emotional skills such as empathy, solidarity, and civic responsibility.

2. **Pedagogical and Methodological Effectiveness:** The main pedagogical added value is the ability to connect theory to practice. Teachers emphasize that by applying curriculum content in real-world contexts, learning becomes more meaningful, which exponentially increases student motivation and engagement. A análise estatística dos dados recolhidos junto dos professores no Alentejo Central, teve como objetivo analisar o perfil sociodemográfico dos professores, o perfil pedagógico, conhecer a experiência e familiaridade com o conceito de Service-Learning, identificar boas praticas de SL (ou ações relacionadas) e medir o impacto percecionado pelos professores. Procurou ainda explorar temas como a validação de competências, voluntariado inclusivo percecionadas pelos professores, e recolher opiniões e sugestões sobre o tema do SL e do Voluntariado Inclusivo no Alentejo Central.

3. **Community Transformation and Inclusion:** SL projects strengthen the link between school and community, generating visible social impact and reinforcing a sense of belonging. This approach is also a driver of inclusion, as it values the abilities of all students and promotes collaboration for the common good.

3.2. Weaknesses: Challenges that Limit Practice

Despite recognition of its value, the implementation of SL is hampered by systemic barriers that teachers feel acutely.

Strategic Challenge - Practical Implication for Teachers

Time and Curriculum Framework - The overwhelming majority of teachers (evidenced by responses such as “lack of time” and “extra, unpaid hours”) see SL as an overload of pro bono work, rather than an integrated part of their workload.

Institutional Support and Recognition - The “lack of active recognition” by school leaders and the perception that “evaluation is complex” undermine the motivation and sustainability of projects.

Operational and Partnership Challenges The difficulty in coordinating with external partners and the “closed-mindedness of some institutions” create logistical obstacles that hinder the continuity and scale of projects.

This tension between recognized potential and perceived barriers is directly reflected in the students' experience.

4. The Students' Perspective: Motivation to Help vs. Barriers to Action

Students show a high level of interest and motivation to participate in volunteer activities, but are often prevented from doing so by practical and systemic obstacles that mirror the challenges faced by teachers.

4.1. What Motivates Students to Participate?

The main motivations of students are intrinsic and reveal a strong sense of civic duty and personal development:

- * Helping others (78%): Altruism and empathy are by far the main drivers. This data shows that young people have a genuine desire to contribute to the well-being of their community.
- * Learning new things (62%): Students value volunteering as an experiential learning opportunity where they can develop practical skills such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving.

4.2. What Prevents Students from Participating?

The barriers identified by students are not signs of apathy, but rather symptoms of systemic failures that need to be addressed:

1. Lack of time (70%): This is the main obstacle and reflects the way volunteering is structured. This perception confirms that without formal curricular integration—a direct consequence of unfamiliarity with SL methodology—volunteering is relegated to an extracurricular activity that competes with academic responsibilities, rather than being a core learning experience.
2. Lack of transportation (38%): This logistical challenge reveals an equity issue. The inability to travel to project sites makes participation a privilege for some, rather than an opportunity accessible to all.
3. Lack of information (30%): This is a failure of institutional communication. Many interested students do not participate simply because they are unaware of existing opportunities, how or where to apply.

Overcoming these barriers experienced by students and teachers depends on a more cohesive ecosystem, where partner organizations play a key role.

5. The Role of Organizations and the Way Forward

Third sector organizations in Central Alentejo are experienced and essential partners in the school volunteering ecosystem. Although most are unfamiliar with the formal terminology of Service-Learning, they already implement projects that align with its principles and recognize its high potential. The main conclusion that emerges is the need to transform the current reactive ecosystem into a proactive and coordinated model. This is where an entity such as the Eugénio de Almeida Foundation (FEA) is identified as having a central role. The teachers' recommendations point to the FEA leading the creation of a “territorial coordination platform” to facilitate partnerships and share good practices, as well as a “Regional Quality Seal” to recognize and standardize initiatives, transforming isolated practices into a cohesive regional strategy.

6. Conclusion: Transforming Potential into Coordinated Action

The diagnosis is clear: Central Alentejo has a solid foundation for school volunteering, but the lack of a common language and formal structure is the direct cause of teacher overload, barriers to student access, and operational fragmentation that limit its impact. To transform this latent potential into systemic action, the following strategic recommendations are essential:

1. **Formalize the Methodology:** Promote training for teachers and organizations on Service-Learning to give a name, structure, and pedagogical intentionality to existing practices. This will allow activities to no longer be seen as “extra” and to be recognized for their curricular value.
2. **Create a Support Ecosystem:** Develop a regional network, led by an entity such as FEA, to act as a “bridge” between schools and organizations. This network should facilitate partnerships, share resources, centralize communication of opportunities, and help resolve logistical and operational challenges.
3. **Integrate and Value:** Work with schools to integrate SL across the curriculum, beyond its exclusive dependence on the Citizenship and Development subject, and create a formal and standardized recognition system. The creation of a regional “Skills Passport,” for example, could enhance the value of students' experience in their academic and professional careers.

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