Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

School Library Professionals Report Inadequate Student Digital Information Literacy Across Global Contexts

Reviewed by:
Quincy D. McCrary
Assistant Professor
Information Services and Liaison Librarian to the College of Medicine
University of Illinois, Chicago
Chicago, Illinois, United States of America
Email: qmccrary@uic.edu

Abstract

Objective – To explore school library professionals' perceptions of their students' digital information literacy (DIL) knowledge, skills, and learning opportunities across multi-country contexts.

Design – Cross-sectional survey questionnaire.

Setting – School library professionals (SLPs) working in 63 countries. Four public libraries in Norway: The Northern and central-Eastern regions (2), and Oslo (2).

Subjects – 971 SPLs responded to the survey, of which 801 (82.5%) were included in the analysis as they indicated they were knowledgeable about their students' DIL."

Methods – Data was collected via an online Qualtrics-hosted survey from July 12 to August 29, 2024. This analysis focused on one block of questions within a larger international survey of SLPs (Merga &

Mat Roni, 2025, p. 401). The DIL measurement included 12 Likert-scale items determining access to technology, DIL education provision, and students' DIL skills. The researchers conducted partial correlation tests and regression analyses, controlling for country income level. A three-step mediation analysis with Sobel test examined the role of school libraries in DIL instruction. The survey instrument underwent cognitive piloting with diverse international SLPs to ensure cross-contextual validity.

Main Results – The findings revealed that although technological infrastructure was nearly universal (95.1% reported majority internet access at country level), and DIL instruction was reportedly integrated across all schooling years in most schools (75.8%), fewer than half of SLPs perceived DIL development as a priority at their schools, with even fewer (48.8%) noting it was prioritized at the national level. The respondents perceived students' DIL skills as low, with only 43.7% of SLPs agreeing that students have strong DIL skills for their age. Even fewer SLPs believed students possessed sound strategies for evaluating online information credibility (34.2%) or expertise (27.8%). The data revealed a moderate positive correlation ($r = .56$, $p < .001$) between DIL instruction and perceived student DIL skills.

Conclusion – While many respondents reported that technological infrastructure was widely available, the authors emphasize that global internet access remains uneven, with only 57% of the population reliably connected. Findings should therefore be interpreted with these disparities in mind. The authors recommend greater prioritization of DIL instruction in schools. They also suggest an increased utilization of SLPs (and school libraries) who possess unique qualifications for DIL education but remain underutilized in 35% of contexts.

Commentary

This study addresses a critical gap in understanding how students' digital information literacy (DIL) skills are perceived by SLPs across multiple countries. With increasing concerns about misinformation, disinformation, and the evaluation of online expertise, this research provides insights into the state of DIL education, particularly in high-income nations. Previous studies have raised concerns about students' abilities to evaluate the credibility of online information (Breakstone et al., 2021; McGrew et al., 2018), and this multi-country survey adds to these concerns from the perspective of SLPs.

Using Glynn's (2006) critical appraisal tool for library and information research, several strengths and limitations emerge. The study's major strengths include its large sample size (n= 801 included participants), which exceeded power requirements, and its scope spanning 63 countries. The researchers employed rigorous survey development procedures, including cognitive piloting with SLPs from diverse contexts and provided clear conceptual definitions of digital information literacy, misinformation, and disinformation to ensure consistent understanding across respondents. The use of partial correlations and mediation analysis to control for country income level demonstrates a rigorous approach to addressing potential confounding variables.

Significant limitations affect the generalizability of findings. The July–August 2024 data collection period coincided with summer vacation in many Northern hemisphere countries, which may have limited participation from non-Australian respondents. Nearly half of respondents (47.7%) were from Australia, where schools were in session during this period. This timing may partly explain the disproportionate Australian representation. The sample exhibits a pronounced bias toward high-income countries. The English-only survey format and online-only distribution method systematically excluded SLPs from lower-resource and possible "English as second language" contexts. Details on how the survey was disseminated are limited. The article notes only that participants accessed a Qualtrics-hosted survey via hyperlink but does not specify whether recruitment occurred through school library associations, direct email, or other channels. This lack of transparency makes it difficult to assess the comprehensiveness of recruitment. The study does not clarify the professional

qualifications of respondents (e.g., teacher-librarians, library assistants, library technicians). Given international variation in training and certification, this omission complicates the interpretation of results and their generalizability. For example, in Australia, many school librarians hold advanced degrees in education or librarianship, whereas in some Canadian provinces, many school libraries are staffed by assistants with minimal formal training. The study uses the term "schooling years" throughout, but left it undefined. Without clarification of whether this refers to primary, secondary, or the full K–12 range, the results are open to interpretation. Breaking results down by specific school levels would have provided more nuanced insights.

The study acknowledges these limitations but does not fully address how this sampling bias might affect the interpretation of results, particularly regarding DIL priorities and resource availability. Reliance on self-reported perceptions rather than objective measures represents another limitation. While SLPs' perspectives and expertise are valuable, their judgments may not align with actual student performance, particularly when interpreting the correlation between DIL instruction and perceived skill development.

This research has important implications for school library practice and educational policy. The finding that school libraries play an important role in DIL instruction in only 65% of contexts implies that SLPs, despite their unique qualifications, are underutilized in 35% of schools. Educational leaders should consider how to better leverage existing expertise within their schools rather than viewing DIL as solely a classroom responsibility. The weak prioritization of DIL at both school and country levels, even in countries with mandatory curriculum requirements, indicates a significant implementation gap that warrants attention. For practicing SLPs, these findings provide evidence to support advocacy for expanded roles in DIL instruction and highlight the importance of demonstrating their value through visible, collaborative DIL programs.

References

Breakstone, J., Smith, M., Wineburg, S., Rapaport, A., Carle, J., Garland, M., & Saavedra, A. (2021). Students' civic online reasoning: A national portrait. *Educational Researcher*, *50*(8), 505–515. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211017495

Glynn, L. (2006). A critical appraisal tool for library and information research. *Library Hi Tech*, *24*(3), 387-399. https://doi.org/10.1108/07378830610692154

McGrew, S., Breakstone, J., Ortega, T., Smith, M., & Wineburg, S. (2018). Can students evaluate online sources? Learning from assessments of civic online reasoning. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, *46*(2), 165-193. https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2017.1416320

Merga, M. K., & Mat Roni, S. (2025). School library professionals' perceptions of students' digital information literacy. *Journal of Library Administration*, *65*(4), 397–411. https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2025.2475701