

Behind the Inspiring Connections: Research and Researchers in School Librarianship. A Progress Report

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ABSTRACT

The international study of research and researchers in the field of school librarianship that is described in this paper has two main areas of focus. The first broad aim is to provide an overview of the current (as of 2000) state-of-the-art of research in school librarianship, and to compare it with the results of similar work undertaken in 1995, in order to identify trends and developments. The second broad aim is to identify current active researchers in the field of school librarianship internationally, as the basis for a survey. The survey (using interviews and a mailed questionnaire) will investigate issues associated with research in school librarianship, identified through a review of the literature and other methods. A progress report and preliminary results will be provided in the conference session.

BACKGROUND

It is through research and the application of the results of research to policy-making and practice that “inspiring connections” are made and the profession moves forward. However, mixed views about the current state of research in school librarianship are held by both practitioners and researchers, in relation to both the quantity and quality of the research that is published. In addition, practitioners and researchers have raised a number of concerns about what are seen as barriers to research (or barriers to large-scale and/or quality research) in our field.

Speaking at the 1994 IASL conference in Pittsburgh, Ken Haycock noted that “one often hears the refrain that there is no research in teacher-librarianship, no proof of effect on student achievement, no concrete evidence of value for money” (Haycock, 1994). On the basis of his “What Works” analyses of research, though, he has also said that “the common complaint that there is no research in teacher-librarianship is clearly not true. There may not be enough, and what there is may be too dated, or it may not address the questions we would pose. There is, however, sufficient research to provide a base for further investigation...” (Haycock, 1992, p.12). This cautious “optimism for research” was shared by Robert Grover and Susan G. Fowler (1993) who studied the research literature related to school library media programs between 1987 and 1991, and the trends they identified were also evident in a volume of research articles and papers in the field of school librarianship that the author compiled for IASL in 1996 (Clyde, 1996a, p.5). Further, there are indications that research now has a higher profile — for example, the continued success of these international

research forums associated with IASL conferences since 1997, the establishment of the IASL Takeshi Murofushi Research Award and the IASL/Softlink International Research Grant, the frequent publication of research articles in IASL's journal *School Libraries Worldwide*, and the introduction of regular research columns in professional journals such as *Scan* (co-ordinated by Ross Todd) and *Access* (coordinated by James Henri).

Despite these indications, researchers in the field of librarianship and school librarianship have continued to suggest that there are problems (see, for example, Stroud, 1982; Katzer, 1989; Henri, 1998). To some extent, these perceived problems are associated with the research itself, as suggested above. Though there is evidence of increasing improvement in the quality, and perhaps quantity, of the research in general (see, for example, Haycock, 1994; McClure & Bishop, 1989; Grover & Fowler, 1993), Henri and Freeman (1998) were unable to draw any firm conclusions about patterns and trends in quality and quantity of the research related to school librarianship in the one country they studied, Australia.

However, it is clear that the problems do not relate just to the perceived quantity and quality of the research. More fundamental is a perceived lack of support for research in school librarianship and a poor "research environment" in our profession. For example, the Takeshi Murofushi Research Award and the IASL/Softlink International Research Grant, while a welcome step forward for IASL, carry a grant of just US\$500 each and an expectation that the winners attend (unfunded), and present a paper at, a subsequent IASL conference. A small-scale study reported by the author (Clyde, 1994) of participants at an IASL conference, indicated that they saw the main obstacles to research in our profession as lack of money, lack of time, and lack of research skills. Other obstacles cited included funding and staffing cuts (which resulted in greater time pressures on the job), a lack of understanding of the value of research on the part of both practitioners and administrators, the lack of research background among members of the profession, the limited dissemination of existing research findings, and "the perception that the major outside funding agencies had little interest in funding large scale" projects (Clyde, 1994, p.4).

Regardless of whether or not the perceptions that there are problems with the research in the field of school librarianship and with the research environment of the profession are valid, they still have an effect. They influence attitudes and intended behaviors (Klobas & Clyde, 2000, pp.6-7); in this case, attitudes to research and the intention to either use the results of research or undertake research in school librarianship.

Aims of the Research

Rather than describing a discrete study with its own specific aims or purpose, this paper outlines a series of inter-linked and mutually dependent studies that address various aspects of the broad topic of "research and researchers in school librarianship". None have been completed at the time of writing, so this paper is in the form of a progress report. While the studies grew out of the concerns described above, they are also rooted in the processes used for, and the findings of, previous related studies and projects carried out or supervised by the author. The following broad aims have been identified for the studies:

- To provide an overview of the current (2000) state-of-the-art of research in school librarianship;

- To compare the current state-of-the-art with the results of similar work undertaken in 1996/1996, in order to identify trends and developments over a decade;
- To identify the current active researchers in the field of school librarianship internationally, as the basis for a survey;
- To identify and investigate issues associated with research in school librarianship, including quality/quantity issues and issues associated with perceived barriers to research in school librarianship.

More specific and detailed aims have been developed for each of the various studies that are described in this paper.

There are some limits to the studies, including some that are the result of limits to the earlier work (for example, Clyde, 1996a) on which the current research is based. Only published research is being studied, in the form of research articles in professional and research journals, and papers in published conference proceedings and other collections of articles and papers. In part, this reflects the accessibility of research reports in these formats, as against theses, dissertations, and unpublished research reports. However, it also reflects a conviction that publication is an important part of the research process for a profession as a whole, as well as an indicator of the commitment of the researchers. The studies are further limited to research published in English, regardless of the country in which the research was carried out or published. The potential effects of these limitations will be discussed as part of the analyses.

METHODOLOGY

In keeping with the wide-ranging aims of the series of inter-linked studies, a number of different research methodologies have been or will be employed for data collection and analysis. They include a literature review and analysis, content analysis of documents, structured interviews, and a mailed questionnaire. In addition, the sampling (or population definition) frames have varied according to the aims and purposes of the particular studies.

The Literature Review

The literature review covered discussions of research in school librarianship at all levels, including work carried out for research degrees, national and international studies, and research (including action research) carried out by practitioners in schools. It identified previous studies of research in librarianship and school librarianship, analyses of the nature of the research and topics studies, analyses of research quality, and studies of barriers to research. One of the aims of the literature review was to identify issues associated with research in school librarianship that could be investigated further through the surveys of active researchers in the field.

The identification of relevant literature has been an ongoing part of the various studies, in particular the identification of the research literature of school librarianship from 1990, and the identification of the current active researchers. This has been done through, for example, searches of LISA, Library Literature, ERIC, British Education Index and SocialSciSearch, as well as regular monitoring of professional and research journals and published conference proceedings.

Identifying the Research

What is research? What is a research publication? These questions are fundamental to this series of studies, and numerous definitions were identified through the literature review. Among the more generally-accepted definitions of research in the library and information science literature (that is, definitions that are cited and accepted by other researchers in our field) are those of, for instance, Peritz (1980-81), Busha and Harter (1980), Nour (1985), Buttlar (1991), and Stephenson (1993). An analysis of these and other definitions for a project on research publishing, carried out at the University of Iceland (Pálsdóttir *et al.*, 1997), led to a definition of a “research publication” that combined the most important aspects of all the definitions:

“... a systematic investigation and the collection and analysis of data in order to establish new facts and to increase knowledge. The research has to have an aim, the phenomena to be investigated must be defined, and the results and conclusions must be set in a wider context (for instance, through a review of the literature, and discussion of the historical background). It is also important that the author describes the research methodology and the articles or papers should be published in recognised sources.”

This work resulted in a checklist that could be used to identify a research publication:

- The inclusion of some kind of statement that the work is based on research;
- The problem or phenomenon to be investigated is defined;
- There is a statement of aim or purpose, hypotheses to be tested, or other means of indicating the focus of the enquiry;
- The research methods are described;
- There is evidence of a literature review and/or a discussion of the background to the research;
- The results are presented and conclusions are drawn from them;
- A reference list or bibliography is provided;
- The article or paper must be more than two pages long.

The last requirement was established after consideration of the publishing policies of the journals in the Icelandic study. When it became apparent that some kind of lower limit would be needed for the present study, the limit from the Icelandic study was adopted in the absence of any other guidelines.

In 1995/1996, the author undertook a project for IASL, the preparation of a collection of articles and papers that described research projects in the field of school librarianship (Clyde, 1996a). With the title *Sustaining the Vision*, this was published as a book by the Association, in honour of Jean E. Lowrie. The IASL Board specified that the articles and papers selected for inclusion should already have been published, and thus, in most cases, have passed through a peer review process. It was also decided at this stage that the book should include only articles and papers published in English in the preceding five years. In

addition, it was decided that the articles and papers should describe work carried out within the general field of school librarianship; “material from related fields like school administration, children’s literature, audiovisual media, children’s reading, and/or public/community library services for young people was to be included only if there was strong evidence of school library involvement” (Clyde, 1996a, p.5).

The editor’s introduction to the book notes that “more than 70 periodical titles (professional journals and newsletters) from more than 50 countries were scanned” (p.5) for potential articles, along with conference proceedings or conference programmes of IASL and its members associations, and the proceedings of other conferences like the annual “Online Information” meetings in London and New York that were known to include papers related to school librarianship (Clyde, 1996a, p.6). Publications covered the years 1990 to 1995 inclusive. Journals and conference papers were consulted in the Library of the University of Wales Aberystwyth, the BLISS collection at the Library Association in London (now held in the British Library), the libraries of Edith Cowan University and Curtin University of Technology in Perth (Western Australia), the National and University Library of Iceland, the libraries of the University of British Columbia (Vancouver, Canada), and the libraries of the University of Washington in Seattle (USA), among others. The Library of the University of Wales Aberystwyth, in particular, was an important source of publications from developing countries and Asian countries. Online searches of ERIC and LISA on DIALOG were undertaken before work in libraries and again at the end of the process (the latter to ensure that no recent work had been missed). A record was kept of each publication that met the criteria for a research publication (Clyde, 1996b), with an indication of topic, research methodologies used, and country in which the research was undertaken.

The same strategies were used in 2000 to identify research articles and papers in the field of school librarianship for the period 1995 to 1999. Appendix 1 lists journals and conference proceedings from which research articles or conference papers were selected, either in 1996 or in 2000 or both. (Note that the list of publications scanned was much more extensive than this.) Some journals ceased publication after 1995, new journals emerged, while some changed title. One, *School Library Media Quarterly*, changed both name (to *School Library Media Research*) and format of publication (it became a Web-based journal in 1998). The publications for 1995 will have been scanned twice, once in 1995/6, and once in 2000, and the same information recorded about each article/paper. Thus the two analyses of the 1995 literature will form a control mechanism to ensure that the work was undertaken in the same way though the analyses were undertaken a lustrum apart.

It is already clear from the preliminary analyses that over the last five years, just two journals have provided the major focus for research publishing in the field of school librarianship: IASL’s *School Libraries Worldwide* (which commenced publication in 1995); and the American Association of School Librarians’ electronic journal *School Library Media Research* (including articles published under its former name, *School Library Media Quarterly*). This is despite the fact that an analysis shows that only around 56 per cent of articles in *School Libraries Worldwide* are research articles (in terms of the definition used for this project). In all, research articles related to school librarianship were located in 51 journals and research papers related to school librarianship were located in the conference proceedings of a number of organisations including IASL, the Australian School Library Association (ASLA), and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA).

Table 1

Research Articles in School Libraries Worldwide

Issue	<u>Number of Research Articles</u>	<u>Number of Other Articles</u>	<u>Total Number of Articles (excluding editorials)</u>
1(1) January 1995	7	-	7
1(2) July 1995	1	3	4
2(1) January 1996	2	7	9
2(2) July 1996	3	1	4
3(1) January 1997	2	5	7
3(2) July 1997	4	3	7
4(1) January 1998	4	2	6
4(2) July 1998	2	8	10
5(1) January 1999	7	-	7
5(2) July 1999	7	1	8
Totals	39 (56.5%)	30 (43.5%)	69 (100%)

Identifying the Researchers

Generally, studies of research in the field of library and information science have been carried out through analyses of higher degree theses (for example, Stroud, 1982) or articles in research journals (for example, Järvelin & Vakkari, 1993) or papers presented at research-oriented conferences (for example, Snelson & Talar, 1991) or a combination of these. Through the studies of theses, and/or research articles, and/or conference papers, the people who contribute to the research of the discipline are identified. For this particular project, the aim was to analyse the views of “active researchers” about the research climate or environment of school librarianship. The small-scale survey of 1993 referred to above (Clyde, 1994) had sought responses about barriers to research (among other things) from a group of people that included established researchers, but was mostly composed of people who were sufficiently interested in research to attend research sessions at conferences but who were not themselves active researchers. Would the views of active researchers be different? What could be learned about the research environment of our profession from the people who would seem to be its research success stories?

This then raised two important questions: How can an active researcher be defined?; and How can an active researcher be identified? If it is accepted that an active researcher will be publishing research articles and papers, then the database of research articles and papers, developed by the author for the studies described above, becomes important. It is assumed that an active researcher would be involved in more than one project over a period of five years, and would be publishing on an ongoing basis (either alone or with colleagues). Thus a current “active researcher” in the field of school librarianship was defined (for the purposes of this work) as a person who had published at least three research articles or papers (as defined above), dealing with at least two different projects in the field of school librarianship (as defined for the *Sustaining the Vision* book), during the five-year period from 1995 to 1999 (and in later analyses, from 1996 to 2000).

Table 2

Potential Frames for Identification of Researchers, 1995-1999

<u>Criteria</u>	<u>Number of Researchers</u>
At least three published research articles or papers related to at least two projects	34
Two published research articles or papers related to at least two projects	23
At least two published research articles or papers (one project)	14
One published research article or paper	175
Total Number of Researchers / Authors	246

Table 3

Pattern of Authorship, 1995-1999

	<u>Number of Articles / Papers</u>
Articles/papers with one author	213
Articles/papers with two authors	75
Articles/papers with three authors	13
Articles/papers with more than three authors	6
Total Articles / Papers	308

The identification of only 34 active researchers for the period 1995 to 1999 (see Table 2) who met this definition was disappointing, given the international focus of the work. It appears that this total will not change very substantially when publications for 2000 are considered (in the next stage of the work), though two of the 34 are now deceased. In order to check for possible omissions from the list, the names of the 34 researchers were sent to two people whose professional activities place them in a position of coming into frequent contact with researchers in the field of school librarianship. They were asked to check through the list and report any people whose names they would expect to see on such a list, but who were not there. At the same time, the author compiled her own list of "surprise omissions". Author searches of ERIC and LISA were carried out for all the names suggested, but without any new names being added to the list as a result. Some of the suggested names were of people who are currently active in research in library and information science in general, who do some work in the field of school librarianship. While they would have met the criteria of at least three published research articles or papers if their total research output were considered, they did not qualify as active researchers in the field of school librarianship on the basis of their work in school librarianship. It may seem that this is harsh, but it has to be noted that some of the people who qualified as "current active researchers in the field of school librarianship", also undertook research in other areas of library and information science as well.

Comparative Document Analysis of the Published Research

A comparative analysis will be undertaken of the research articles and papers collected for the years 1990-1994 and 1995-1999, from the data included in the database about each item. The purpose of this analysis will be to identify trends in research in school librarianship over the decade from 1990. Among the aspects to be considered will be:

- The quantity of research reported in published form in the field of school librarianship;
- Any change in type of publication in which research results in the field of school librarianship are being reported;
- The countries in which research is being undertaken and published or about which research is being undertaken and published, in the field of school librarianship;
- The topics that are being studied;
- The research methodologies being used.

Depending on the results of preliminary analyses, some author characteristics may also be included in the analyses; for example, it may be possible to determine, from the author information attached to articles and papers, whether research is being carried out by academics or practitioners or other groups, and if there have been any changes in this over the decade.

The database of research articles and papers exists in two forms: as a card index and as a computer-based file. Analyses will employ both the analytical features of the database software itself and the SPSS statistical package with DeltaGraph.

Surveys of the Current Active Researchers

The original intention had been to carry out a questionnaire survey of the active researchers identified through the strategy outlines above. However, the relatively small number of active researchers so identified (only 34 using data from 1995 to 1999), suggests that it would be more appropriate to employ a two-tier strategy: structured interviews (in person or by telephone or by email) with the current active researchers identified through the work described above; and a mailed questionnaire survey of less active researchers identified (using a second sampling frame) through the database created for this series of studies. For example, using the requirement that the researcher have published two research articles or papers in the field of school librarianship in the five years (regardless of the number of projects) would provide a considerably larger group of subjects for a questionnaire survey (71); reducing the requirement to one published research article or paper in the same time span would result in a much greater increase in the number of research authors (246), but also substantially increase the number of researchers who have published in this field only as second or third author. The various possibilities are being explored, using the database, before a decision is made. The value of using a two-tier research design at this point is that it will provide a basis for discussion of the research environment of school librarianship (including the factors that facilitate research and the barriers to research, real or perceived), from the perspective of both active and less active researchers in the field of school librarianship.

The survey instruments will be based partly on the literature review, which suggests factors in the research environment of school librarianship that facilitate or encourage research or that inhibit it or act as barriers to research. In addition, some of the survey questions will explore issues raised in research forums or on listservs. The factors or issues raised in the literature are particularly related to the journals in which academic researchers are encouraged or pressured to publish:

- Pressure on academic researchers to publish in “prestigious” journals as defined by their deans (which may not include journals related to school librarianship)(Blake, 1994), or in journals that score high in journal ranking exercises (which, like those reported by Nisonger in 1999, usually do not include school librarianship journals).
- Poor perceptions of the prestige of journals in the field of school librarianship held by school librarianship faculty members, colleagues, and administrators, which discourages school library faculty from publishing in those journals (Blake & Tjoumas, 1995) or even from doing research in this field.
- Pressure on academic researchers to publish only in refereed journals (Atkinson, 1996), of which there are very few in the field of school librarianship, and just one that publishes only research articles.
- The failure of some universities to recognise electronic journals as being the equivalent of print journals (which makes faculty reluctant to publish in the major research journal of school librarianship, *School Library Media Research*) despite the more positive view of attitudes to electronic journals presented in the work of Cronin and Overfelt (1995).

The factors or issues raised on listservs and in conference discussions are much more wide-ranging, and include the following:

- The necessity for academics to strike a balance between teaching and research, and the relationship between teaching and research in the work of an academic.
- The criteria and processes used in the evaluation of research output of faculty members in the library and information science departments/schools.
- Lack of research funding specifically targeted to supporting research in school librarianship and the relatively small amounts that are available through competitive research grants (by comparison with other areas of education or librarianship).
- The relatively small number of people in the field of school librarianship with PhD degrees and research training, even amongst university or college library science faculty.
- The use of adjunct (Steinfurst & Bracy, 1996) or part-time faculty to teach school librarianship courses or courses in children’s or youth librarianship; these faculty members often do not have access to research funds or a time allocation for research.
- Increasing pressure on the time of personnel in the school systems, which discourages research activity at the school system or school level.

- The failure of schools and school systems to recognise research as a useful or valuable activity, particularly when people are being considered for promotion.
- The reluctance of some institutions and journals to recognise action research (usually undertaken by practitioners) as true research that is worthy of publication or support.

The structured interview format with a relatively small number of subjects will allow for detailed exploration of issues of concern to individual active researchers, as well as for collecting responses across a range of issues and concerns. It will also permit any new issues and concerns to emerge. In addition, it is anticipated that, since the respondents will be active researchers, they may shed some light on the positive aspects of undertaking research in school librarianship, since the literature deals mainly with the problems. The mailed questionnaire will be less detailed than the schedule used for the structured interviews, and will include both open-ended and multiple choice-questions. Both strategies will provide a means of testing the validity of the perceptions outlined above. Data analysis will employ both quantitative and qualitative strategies.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The conference presentation will provide an overview of the inter-linked studies and a summary of the work completed by July 2001. The preliminary results of the document analysis will be available and will be presented at the conference as a series of summary graphs and tables with comments on the trends in research in school librarianship over the decade from 1990. A progress report will be provided on the surveys of current active researchers, with any preliminary findings that may be available at the time of the conference.

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APPENDIX 1

JOURNALS AND PUBLISHED CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS FROM WHICH ARTICLES / PAPERS HAVE BEEN USED

Journals

Access.

African journal of Library, Archives and Information Science.

Asian Libraries.

Australian Library Journal.

Australian Library Review.

Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science / Revue canadienne des sciences de l'information et de bibliothéconomie.

Education for Information.

Education Libraries Journal.

Emergency Librarian / Teacher Librarian.

Feliciter / Canadian Library Journal.

IFLA Journal.

Illinois Libraries.

Information Development.

Information Trends News Magazine.

International Information and Library Review.

International / New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship.

Journal of Education for Library and Information Science.

Journal of Educational Media and Library Services.

Journal of Librarianship and Information Science.

Journal of the American Society for Information Science — JASIS.

Journal of the Hong Kong Library Association.

Journal of Youth Services in Libraries.

Knowledge Quest (AASL).

Libraries and Culture.

The Library.

Library History.

Library and Information Science Research — LISR.

Library Review.

Library Trends.

LIBRES.

Libri.

Microcomputers for Information Management.

Nigerian Libraries.

Nigerian Library and Information Science Review.

North Carolina Libraries.

Orana.

RQ / Reference and User Services Quarterly.

Scan.

Scandinavian Public Library Quarterly.

The School Librarian.

School Libraries in Canada.

School Libraries in View.

School Libraries Worldwide.

School Library Journal.

School Library Media Quarterly / School Library Media Research.

South African Journal of Library and Information Science.

Swedish Library Research / Svensk Biblioteksforskning.

The Teaching Librarian.

Third World Libraries.

World Libraries.

Conference Proceedings

Australian School Library Association — ASLA.

International Association of School Librarianship — IASL.

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions — IFLA.

“Online Information” international meetings (London and New York).

The Treasure Mountain Research Retreats for School Library Media Programs — published proceedings only.