

Knowledge and Skills for Life: School Libraries in Disadvantaged Areas of Northern Ireland

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Introduction

This study involved data collection and analysis from four distinct phases of research to establish the features of current provision of post-primary school library services in Northern Ireland; and how these services are being implemented in disadvantaged areas. The research also considers the challenges for school library provision, explores examples of good practice, and sets out recommendations for the future for both provision within schools and at a Northern Ireland policy level.

Statement of the Research Problem

While the core aim of this research involves establishing and understanding the current provision of school library services in Northern Ireland; it also considers and examines other influences and factors, such as the role and status of the school librarian within the school in supporting departments to deliver (formal) curriculum learning, and also aims to examine the purpose and role of school libraries particularly in disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland as learning hubs within a school community that present a 'safe space' for pupils to learn and develop knowledge and skills outside of the classroom environment. The research is underpinned by the following research questions:

RQ 1: What are the features of current library provision in all post-primary schools across Northern Ireland?

RQ 2: How is school library provision being implemented in disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland?

RQ 3: What are the learning opportunities provided by the school library from the perspective of staff and pupils?

Literature Review

In addition to reading, writing, literacy skills and academic achievement, Teravainen and Clark (2017) outline how school libraries have been found to have an impact on other skills. Several personal and interpersonal outcomes have also been associated with school library use. A number of studies, including Williams and Wavell, (2001), Cremin and Swann in Pihl et al. (2017), Walworth in McNicol and Brewster (2018), Merga, (2019a and b); have also asserted how school libraries can develop children and young people in a holistic or informal nature such as self-esteem, reading for pleasure and reading for wellbeing schemes. Williams and Wavell (2001) note that the library can contribute, alongside other departments, to learning in its wider sense of motivation, independence and interaction; for instance, an awareness of the needs of others, peer cooperation, use of initiative, and improved motivation to learn. They also noted that there is not a substantial body of evidence with regard to students who would be characterised as “disadvantaged” (Ibid., p.20) in relation to school library use.

Methodology

This research adopted both qualitative and quantitative approaches, referred to as mixed methods research (MMR), considered by researchers such as Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) as the “third research paradigm” in education research (p.14). The researcher used a broad range of data collection methods, influenced by the research aims and questions, including one-to-one interviews, paired interviews, surveys and focus group interviews. In MMR, a sequential exploratory design ensures that the quantitative phase builds on the results of the qualitative phase (QUAL → QUAN) (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). This approach was followed in the first two phases of research, while phase 3 followed a sequential explanatory design, whereby the results of the quantitative phase informed the

qualitative phase (QUAN → QUAL). The final phase of research drew on all previous phases to provide a qualitative framework which incorporated a range of interviews encompassing two school settings.

Figure 1. Phases in the Research

Phase 1: Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders with a role in school library provision in Northern Ireland (from the Education Authority's School Library Service team and a representative from a professional body)
Phase 2: Survey of school library provision in post-primary schools across Northern Ireland
Phase 3: Hybrid data collection from school library staff in disadvantaged areas (combination of paired interviews and survey)
Phase 4: Case studies in two school settings in disadvantaged areas, involving data collection from staff and pupils about the school library

Preliminary Findings & Discussion

The researcher applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to reflexive thematic analysis in the first research phase, and six candidate themes were identified:

- Budget
- Collaboration
- Service Provision
- Promotion
- Strategic Awareness
- Schools in Disadvantaged Areas

These themes helped to formulate a clear picture of contemporary school library services and to undertake a more thorough exploration of these services during the remaining phases of the research. The survey revealed that 13 of the 21 schools with the highest percentage of pupils with Free School Meal Entitlement ($\geq 50\%$ of pupil intake) – often used as a proxy for disadvantage - responded to the survey. The majority of schools who responded to the survey confirmed that their school library does not receive a dedicated annual budget from school funds (51.3%), while the range of annual school spending on books and other learning resources for the library varies from zero to £15k.

The findings from the early phases of research revealed how much of a positive impact the school library contributes to formal and informal learning opportunities for pupils, as well as identifying a significant issue with inequity of school library provision throughout post-primary education in Northern Ireland. Themes and trends from these early stages helped to shape phases 3 and 4 of the research, which incorporated paired interviews with librarians and subsequent in-depth case studies with two schools: including focus group interviews with pupils from ages 11-18 to ensure the pupil voice was considered in the research.

The research findings clearly demonstrate a correlation between school library provision and increased opportunities for reading and literacy development, and direct access to ICT facilities such as laptops which may not always be available in a home setting. Another key finding is that the ‘safe space’ aspect of the school library is recognised as a more relaxed learning environment for children who suffer from anxiety or have diagnosed learning disabilities.

Implications and Conclusions

The implications of the research suggests that dedicated funding towards disadvantaged pupils and schools by Northern Ireland’s Education Authority (EA) possibly in a similar nature to other neighbouring jurisdictions have delivered (such as the DEIS scheme in the Republic of Ireland¹) would be positive in its impact for pupils. By investing in the development of library facilities and resources, the overall learning experience for pupils would be enhanced, while also ensuring the library’s role as an integral part of the school experience, in working best in collaboration with other school departments and staff.

¹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/>

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Biography

Cathal Coyle is a school librarian based in St. Patrick's College Dungannon, County Tyrone. In 2020 he took a career break to embark on PhD research at Ulster University.