# School Library Provision in the Republic of Ireland

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*The provision of state funded school libraries is a common feature of education systems in developed countries internationally. Despite this, the Irish Department of Education funds demonstration libraries in only 30 out of the 730 post-primary (for students aged 12-18) schools nationally. Outside of these, school library provision in Ireland is under researched and very little is known about library facilities, resources, management, and use of the library by the school community. In order to shed some light on the current situation, this study explores, for the first time, school library provision in one province in the West of Ireland (Connacht) in which there are 102 post-primary schools. Of these, only 55 schools confirmed that they have a library and 29 of these participated in the study. The key research questions are as follows: Are there school libraries in post-primary schools in Connacht? Where school libraries exist in this region, how are these resourced, managed and used by the school community? The findings indicate that despite the commitment of individual teachers and schools, the lack of a national school library policy and the lack of funding is very much in evidence in terms of the resources provided for school libraries and their use by teachers and students. The study argues that current school library provision in the majority of schools surveyed, is more analogous to school library provision in developing countries, and that the findings from this region may reflect the situation in post-primary schools nationally.*

## Introduction

Ireland is considered to be a relatively prosperous country with gross domestic product (GDP) per capita the second highest in Europe (European Commission, 2021). Despite this, investment in education is relatively low, with Ireland ranked among the ten countries spending the lowest proportion of GDP on educational institutions across all levels (OECD, 2021). This is reflected in the lack of general investment in school libraries for students at post-primary level (aged 12-18 yrs). Out of a total of 730 post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland, only 30 (4.1%) have a government funded school library that generally aligns with the vision for school libraries as outlined in the 2021 Manifesto of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 2021). This group of 30 libraries, established from 2001, is known as the Junior Certificate School Programme [1] (JCSP) Demonstration Libraries and serves schools in areas designated as disadvantaged. O'Dea (2016) reports that in addition to these 30 schools, a number of fee-paying private schools also provide a professionally staffed school library, although the number of these is not quantified. However, the School Libraries Group of the Library Association of Ireland, LAI SLG (2022) claims

that most fee-paying secondary schools have libraries that are staffed with fully qualified librarians. While the high standards of school library facilities, resources and use by school communities in the JCSP Demonstration libraries is documented (JCSP Support Service, 2005, 2008), little is known about school library provision for the vast majority of post-primary schools in Ireland. This study aims to bring into view school library provision in Irish post-primary schools by investigating provision in Connacht, one of the four provinces of Ireland in the west of the country.

In the view of the authors, best practice in regard to school library provision is deemed to be when a collection of materials appropriate to the needs of students and staff, housed in a dedicated space, is managed by a professional librarian.  At this level, the service drives the development of the school's reading culture and literacy program, works with the school's management and teaching staff in the delivery of curriculum, and leads the school's information skills program. However, given the lack of state investment, the significant majority of school libraries in the Republic of Ireland do not meet this description. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, a school library service was defined as follows: any provision to students of access to books, reading materials or items of information in any format and in any space. By many standards, this definition sets out a low expectation in terms of the level of service that is included in the study. Out of a total of 102 post-primary schools in the province, only 55 confirmed that they had a library matching the definition for this study. Out of these, 29 participated in the study, which explored various aspects of provision including:  What space is available for library use? How do schools utilize library space? What personnel are involved in the provision of the school library service? What are the library holdings and how are they organized, accessed, and funded?  How do schools use public library services? What professional development is offered for staff? What are the school library leadership arrangements? What is the perceived usefulness and impact of the school library, and what aspects of provision are challenging?

# Review of Literature

### *Effective School Library Provision*
Given the focus of the study, it is useful to examine the features of effective school libraries as well as school library policy and practice in a number of developed and developing countries. The literature explores, for example, facilities, resources, staffing and how libraries are integrated into the life of the school. Establishing the common features of effective school libraries informs the survey design and provides a benchmark against which the school library service in Irish schools can be compared.

The contribution of effectively managed school libraries to student motivation, learning and achievement is widely documented in numerous studies (JCSP Support Service, 2005, 2008; Johnston & Green, 2018; Teravainen-Goff & Clark, 2017) as is the role of a professional school librarian (Johnston, 2012; Kennedy & Green, 2013). The library is both an information hub and innovation center in a school (Shonhe, 2019), where the intersection between information literacy, technology, and the development of research skills is beneficial for students in terms of encouraging and developing civic participation, 21st-century life-long learning, and transferable skills for the knowledge-based economy (Loh et al., 2017; Todd & Gordon, 2010; Wangdi et al., 2021).

The 2021 Manifesto of IFLA states that "it is the responsibility of local, regional, and national authorities to support school library programs through specific legislation and policies" to ensure sustained national funding for libraries staffed by qualified school library professionals who collaborate with all members of the school community (IFLA, 2021, p. 1). It recommends that library professionals be members of a library association and that they are supported by trained clerical staff. It highlights the importance of establishing a policy on school library services, professional standards of organization and maintenance, and accessibility to all members of the school community. Further detail in relation to best practice is outlined in the IFLA School Library Guidelines (2015), where 16 recommendations for an effective school library service are provided. Of these, the following are particularly relevant to the current study:

Recommendation 3. A plan should be in place for the development of the three features necessary for the success of a school library: a qualified school librarian; a collection that supports the curriculum of the school; and an explicit plan for ongoing growth and development of the school library.

Recommendation 11. The facilities, equipment, collections, and services of the school library should support the teaching and learning needs of the students and the teachers; these facilities, equipment, collections, and services should evolve as teaching and learning needs change.

Recommendation 10. All school library staff should endeavour to develop collections of physical and digital resources consistent with the school's curriculum and with the national, ethnic, and cultural identities of members of the school community; they also should endeavour to increase access to resources through practices such as cataloguing, curation, and resource sharing.

Recommendation 13. The core instructional activities of a school librarian should be focused on: literacy and reading promotion; media and information literacy instruction; inquiry-based teaching; technology integration; and professional development of teachers. (pp. 10-11)

The 2016 policy paper of SLARI, the School Library Association in the Republic of Ireland which is now the School Libraries Group of the Library Association of Ireland, argues for the provision of school libraries as outlined above (SLARI, 2016).

Gretes (2013) claims that school libraries should develop technology and information literacy; provide motivational reading initiatives; have access to up-to-date digital and print materials and technology, including the curation of openly licensed educational resources; have broadband access; provide regular professional development and collaboration between classroom teachers and school libraries. Indeed, Gretes (2013) goes further by stating that the expanded learning environment when effectively used and supported by proper funding and staffing of school libraries helps to connect the classroom to real world events which ensures the unique interests and needs of students are met. Gretes asserts that school libraries can play an active and key role in preparing students for college, career, and active participation in their communities. Effective libraries also ensure that quality information flows from the library into classrooms and homes (Barrett, 2010). Loh et al. (2017) as well as Great School Libraries (2019) surmise that physical environments can guide social behavior within particular spaces, that a space can be purposefully and intentionally designed to spur favored learning practice, and that such a conceptualisation can be undermined and damaged by using the space for alternative purposes.

### *School Library Provision Internationally*

When exploring school library provision in Ireland, it is useful to explore comparators in other countries. The Great School Libraries (2019) report presents a comprehensive overview of school library provision across some of Ireland's nearest neighbors: England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The study explores library space, which for the purpose of the study is described as "a space which provides access to a curated collection of resources to benefit pupils' learning and development which is separate to a classroom or other shared space" (Great School Libraries, 2015, p. 9). The study finds that in England 87% of participating schools have access to a designated school library space, with figures for Wales and Northern Ireland at 67% and 57% respectively. Overall, 95% of post-primary schools have a dedicated member of staff to run the library. Looking at opening hours, 11% of post-primary schools open for up to 6 hrs daily, 60% between 6-8 hrs daily, and 29% more than 8 hrs daily. Most post-primary pupils have regular timetabled library lessons (58%) with 62% delivering ad-hoc library lessons. Closely related to opening hours, 22% of post-primary schools are staffed up to 6 hrs daily, 61% between 6-8 hrs daily, and 16% more than 8 hrs daily. The survey reveals that schools use library space for other purposes such as: clubs (5%), learning support (5%), detention (7%), exams (2%), event hosting (3%), non library lessons (59%), and meetings (51%). In terms of funding, 88% of schools have a dedicated library budget and 24% of post-primary schools add stock weekly with 27% adding stock monthly. Nearly a quarter of secondary schools typically have stock added weekly 24% or monthly 27%. Overall, 43% provide access to desktop computers.

Although not providing the same level of detail, the National Strategy for School Libraries in Scotland 2018-2023 states that "all secondary schools in Scotland have access to library services either through a dedicated school library, a joint school and community library or from a central local authority library service. The majority are managed by professionally trained librarians who hold academic qualifications in the field of library and information studies or professional management skills" (Scottish Government, 2018, p. 12).

Ahlfeld (2019) highlights the state of America's Libraries Report retrieved from the American Library Association (2019) which claims that out of the 90,400 public and private K-12 schools, 91% have school libraries and 61% have full-time librarians. These figures are in stark contrast to Ireland where only 4.1% of post-primary schools have a state-funded dedicated school librarian. Despite this, Ahlfeld (2019) is extremely critical of the situation for American schools claiming that the lack of "school librarians is a disturbing trend across the nation, but in some pockets, it is a particularly dire situation" (p. 928). In contrast to Ireland, it is clear that in the developed countries outlined above, school library funding from the government is a standard and expected practice in educational systems.

Shonhe (2019) reveals several challenges which may be common to provision in Ireland by investigating school library services in developing countries such as: Malawi, Botswana, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Namibia, Vietnam, and Bangladesh. These include a lack of national library policy, poor staffing practices, lack of adequate funding, poor ICT infrastructure, poor library facilities, and lack of awareness of the potential significance of school libraries. Shonhe (2019) comments that some schools in these countries do not have a room or special space for the school library and that "the quality of libraries in many developing countries is disreputably poor" (p. 7). Such features are interrelated, the lack of national policy results in the lack of funding and subsequently the lack of a qualified librarian means that where libraries do exist, they are generally poorly organized and contain uncatalogued, irrelevant collections which lead to a lack of

information literacy among students and inadequate marketing of and appreciation among staff of the potential of a library service.

### *Context of the Study*

In order to contextualize the findings of this study, the current Department of Education policy and practice as regards school libraries is briefly outlined. In the Republic of Ireland, there is no statutory requirement on schools to provide school libraries, and no vision in education policy for the development of a school library culture or service. Since 2001, a few fully resourced, state-funded libraries, staffed with full-time, professional librarians, operate in selected schools (initially 11, and extended to 30 in 2007) under the aforementioned, highly successful JCSP Demonstration Library Project. A commitment to extend inclusion to 50 schools has not been met (Department of Education and Science, 2005; School Libraries Group of the Library Association of Ireland, 2022). One aspect of library provision that has received state funding, both historically and more recently, is funding for books and reading materials in hard copy and digital formats (Department of Education and Science, 1998; JCSP Libraries, n.d.; Department of Education, 2022). Since 2007, the Department of Education has also financed 167 reading corners in schools that offer the JCSP, which funds for example: books, shelves, and beanbags (JCSP Support Service, n.d.).

The Department of Education policy is to encourage schools to use the public library service rather than to provide school libraries; the national literacy strategy specifically references the use of public libraries (Department of Education and Skills, 2011; Department of Education and Skills, 2017). Schools are being directed to liaise with public library authorities for support (Department of Education and Skills, 2015a; Department of Education, 2022). A liaison is problematic for second-level schools, especially in rural areas where a distance of many miles can be involved between the school and the public library. In 2022, the Department of Education announced a once-off school library book grant of €20 million for primary and post-primary schools for the purchase of books, audio books, and other media for the purposes of improving their existing literacy resource banks. It is clear that current state policy is to support student access to reading materials but not to the much wider benefits of school libraries.

In contrast, it is interesting to note a recent report from the Oireachtas (the bicameral Parliament of Ireland) that recommends the development of a national strategy for school libraries and the establishment of a school library in all schools by the end of 2024 (Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022). The report claims that:

> Senior Cycle Students will be significant users of school library services, in terms of increased Assignments and Project Work. Libraries are places of sanctuary that promote positive mental health and a calm, safe space too. All Primary and Post Primary Schools should have a School Library, School Librarian and full access to the School Digital Library Service. (p. 8)

This recommendation is strongly supported by SLARI (2016) insisting, "that every school pupil in this country is entitled to receive this high-quality service, and that the necessary resources for such school library provision must be built into our education system" (p. 5).

# Methodology

This study explores school library provision in the west of Ireland province of Connacht, in which, during the 2021-2022 school year there were a total of 101 schools, representing 14% of all post-primary schools in Ireland. There is no data publicly available to indicate the number or names of post-primary schools in this region that have a school library. The first step for the research team was to contact each school in turn by phone to establish if they had a school library, as defined for the purpose of this study. Out of 101 schools, only 55 confirmed that they have a library and 46 confirmed that they do not have a library. The full population for this study included all schools in this province that confirmed the existence of a school library and an online survey, using Google Forms, was circulated by email to these schools (Appendix A: Copy of Survey). The survey was completed by the member of staff with responsibility for the school library in each school. It is important to note that the data was gathered in early Summer 2022, two years after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants were asked to report on normal library provision, prior to the impact of Covid-19 on the school library service. Notwithstanding this instruction, it is important to note that some responses may have been influenced by the impact of the pandemic on schools, the degree to which it is impossible to know.

A survey was selected as a method of gathering data, as it allows for the establishment of key statistical information about the library service in participating schools, where little or none has previously existed (Bryman, 2016). The survey design was informed by the review of literature in terms of school library provision and use and included mainly closed, multiple choice and checkbox type questions. Where participants opted for a response other than that offered, they were invited to add a selection in an open text format. Two open-ended questions asked participants about the most challenging aspect of library provision in the school as well as a measure that would most assist in resolving this challenge. The survey explored use, organization and management of library space and holdings, library management and personnel, the use of public library services and the perceived usefulness and impact of the school library.

The data from the survey was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) given its effectiveness as a tool for quantitative data analysis (Rahman & Muktadir, 2021). Responses to questions are presented as descriptive statistics using tables and frequency graphs.

# Findings

The findings in relation to key aspects of library provision are reported under a number of headings as follows: space catering for library and use of library space; people providing school library service such as library holdings, organization, access, funding, using public library services; professional development; leading provision; usefulness and impact; and challenging aspects. The 29 participating schools vary in size from relatively small schools of less than 200 students to schools with above 1,000 students, as outlined in Table 1. Out of the 29 schools surveyed, only one is fee-paying.

**Table 1. Student enrollment 2021-2022**

|  | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Less than 200 students | 11 | 37.9 | 37.9 | 37.9 |
| 200 – 500 students | 8 | 27.6 | 27.6 | 65.5 |
| 500 – 1000 students | 8 | 27.6 | 27.6 | 93.1 |
| Above 1000 students | 2 | 6.9 | 6.9 | 100 |
| Total | 29 | 100 | 100 | |

## *Space Catering for Library*

In terms of the space where the library service is located, several scenarios are evident:  a dedicated room for the library (44.8%, n=13), a space in a classroom (24.1%, n=7), a space in a corridor (13.8%, n= 4), and Other (17.2%, n=5). The details elicited by the option to indicate Other, showed that in 3 of the 5 cases the library is also used for classroom purposes while in the other 2 an ancillary space/room has been converted to provide the library service. Of the 13 schools that have a dedicated room for the library only in 1 school is the library used for timetabled lessons, while lessons in it are sometimes timetabled in 7 of these schools.

## *Use of Library Space*

Figure 1 shows the broad spread of response when participants were asked to identify the ways their library space was used. In addition to the options listed in the survey, participants who selected Other gave the following ways the library space is used: classroom, learning support, counseling, storage of schoolbook rentals, and waiting area for sick students.

Of the 29 libraries surveyed, a substantial majority (65.5%, n=19) stated that they did not provide access to online resources, thus precluding use of digital resources in the library space and equally precluding delivery of an information skills programme (or parts thereof) that would be reliant on internet connectivity.  Regarding the latter, an overwhelming 89.7% (n=26) of libraries surveyed do not provide classes in information skills to students.

**Figure 1. Use of library space**
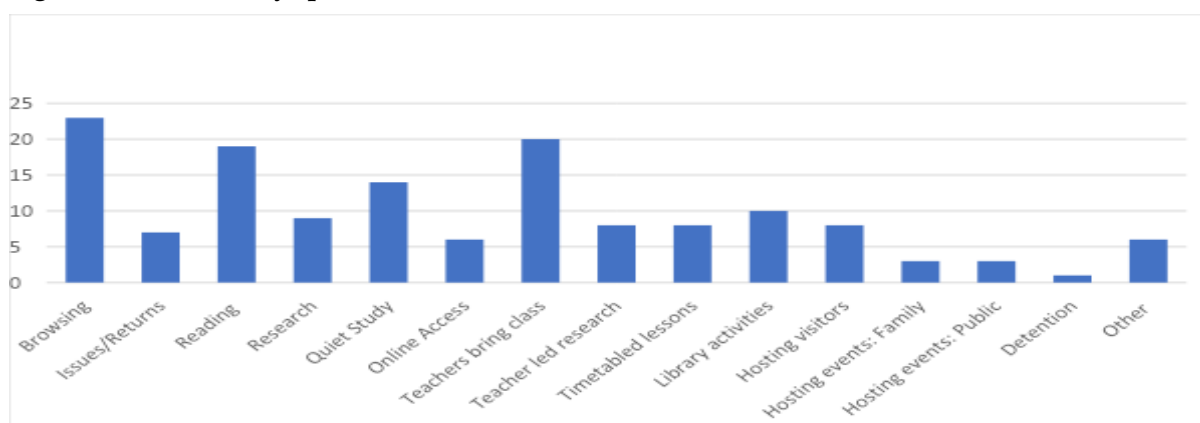
### *People Providing the School Library Service*

In terms of the persons providing the school library service, the voluntary nature of input is very evident with 58.6% (n=17) of the respondents indicating that the service is provided by a non-post-holder member of the English Department (51.7%, n=15) or of some other subject department (6.9%, n=2). There is a clear association of library provision with the teaching of English. Other involvement included students running the library at lunchtime, while one school stated the library was used unsupervised. One of the schools participating in the survey has a state funded JCSP Demonstration Library which is managed by a qualified librarian. A school library committee or group of school student librarians is in place in a minority of schools (37.9%, n=11).

### *Library Holdings*

There is a broad variety of library holdings in the surveyed schools, as evidenced in Figure 2. The findings indicate a very strong focus on the provision of reading materials in hard copy format with considerably less provision of reading materials in digital format. The occurrence of items other than in the traditional reading format is negligible, except for the provision of board games. Of the libraries surveyed, the overwhelming majority (72.4%, n=21) do not have a collection related to local studies.

**Figure 2. Library holdings**
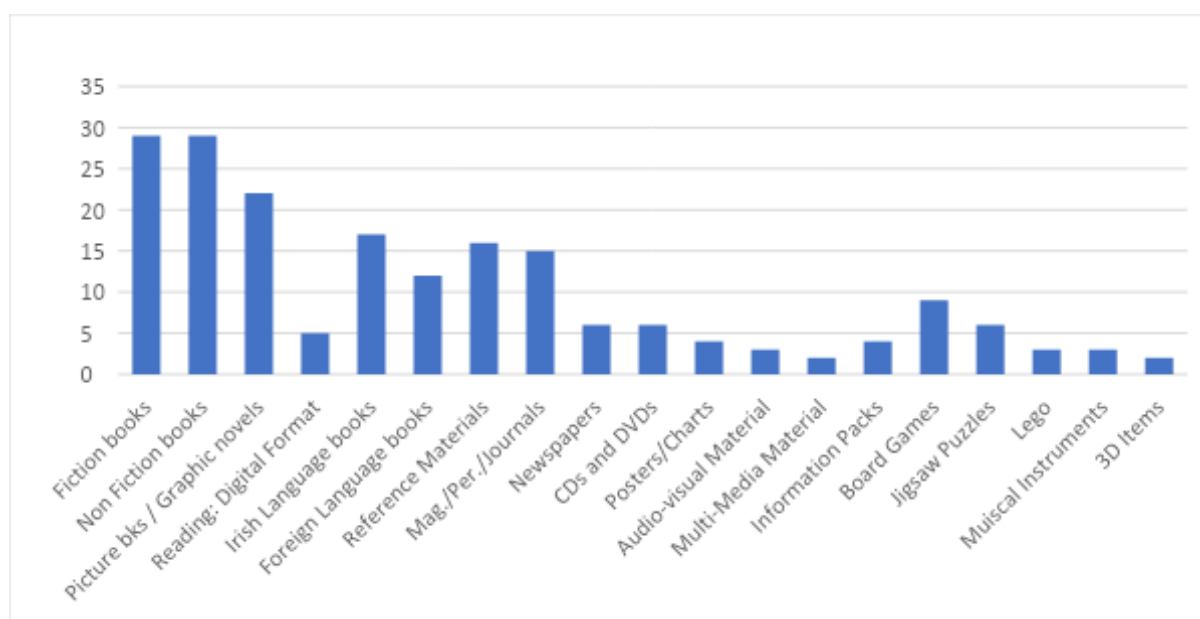


In terms of the size of the library holdings in each of the schools, there is considerable spread in the responses. As can be seen from Table 2, 16 schools report having 1,000 items or less, with 10 schools reporting holdings of 1,000-5,000. Only 3 schools have holdings greater than 5,000 items. It should be noted, however, that while a significant minority of respondents (41.4%, n=12) stated that there is a weeding policy in place, most schools surveyed (58.6%, n=17) do not have one.

**Table 2. Size of library holdings**

|  | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Less than 100 items | 2 | 6.9 | 6.9 | 6.9 |
| 100 – 500 items | 10 | 34.5 | 34.5 | 41.5 |
| 500 – 1000 items | 4 | 13.8 | 13.8 | 55.2 |
| 1000 - 2000 items | 7 | 24.1 | 24.1 | 79.3 |
| 2000 – 5000 items | 3 | 10.3 | 10.3 | 89.7 |
| 5000 – 10000 items | 1 | 3.4 | 3.4 | 93.1 |
| 10000 – 20000 items | 1 | 3.4 | 3.4 | 96.6 |
| 20000 – 50000 items | 1 | 3.4 | 3.4 | 100 |
| Total | 29 | 100 | 100 |  |

## *Organization*

Schools were asked several questions which relate to how the library holdings are organized, namely in regard to the organization of fiction and non-fiction books and the type of catalog used.

Almost half of the schools (48.3%, n=14) organize fiction alphabetically by author's name while 51.7% (n=15) do not. A substantial majority of respondents (65.5%, n=19) do not use the Dewey Decimal System in the organization of their non-fiction collections. The 34.5% (n=10) confirming they did not use Dewey recorded alternative systems for organizing non-fiction, as follows: alphabetical order; junior and senior sections; and according to genre. Table 3 shows practice in regard to cataloging. It is to be noted that 37.9% (n= 11) of respondents have no catalog in place.

**Table 3. Catalog type**

|  | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| No catalog in place | 11 | 37.9 | 37.9 | 37.9 |
| Notebook/copy | 5 | 17.2 | 17.2 | 55.5 |
| Card | 4 | 13.8 | 13.8 | 69.0 |
| Computerized | 9 | 31.0 | 31.0 | 100 |
| Total | 29 | 100 | 100 |  |

## *Access*

Levels of access to the library vary across schools in the study, as can be seen in Table 4. In 9 schools (31%), there is access throughout the school day. Access during breaks or lunch time only, in 27.6% (n=8) of schools, is regular but limited. In the remainder of schools (41.4%, n =12) access is irregular and very limited.

**Table 4. Descriptions of access to the library each week**

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Each day before school, throughout the whole day, and after school | 3 | 10.3 | 10.3 | 10.3 |
| Each day throughout the school day, but not before or after school | 6 | 20.7 | 20.7 | 31.0 |
| During breaks/lunch time only | 8 | 27.6 | 27.6 | 58.6 |
| During English classes only | 2 | 6.9 | 6.9 | 65.5 |
| Only during certain subject classes when the subject teacher brings a class to the library | 5 | 17.2 | 17.2 | 82.8 |
| Only irregularly when the person(s) looking after the library is (are) available | 3 | 10.3 | 10.3 | 93.1 |
| Other | 2 | 6.9 | 6.9 | 100 |
| Total | 29 | 100 | 100 | |

## *Funding*

Schools were asked to indicate all the ways by which their school libraries are funded. The findings, detailed in Table 5, reveal the number of schools that receive voluntary and occasional funding for their libraries. Of the 6 schools that opted to indicate another source of funding, 5 stated that their book collections were based on donated books, findings that again indicate the perception of the school library as primarily a collection of books.

**Table 5. Funding sources**

| Funding Source | Number of responses |
|---|---|
| Funded as a JCSP Demonstration Library Project | 1 (3.4%) |
| Funded as Part of the School's Annual Budget | 13 (44.8%) |
| Funded by School Fundraising | 7 (24.1%) |
| Funded by Parents' Association Fundraising | 5 (17.2%) |
| Funded by Education Sector Resources | 2 (6.9%) |
| Funded by Philanthropic/Charitable Organizations | 2 (6.9%) |
| Funded by Occasional Sources | 0 (0%) |
| Funded by Monetary Awards for Success in Events Organized by the Library or the School | 0 (0%) |
| Other | 6 (20.7%) |

### Using Public Library Services

Given the national policy to promote links between schools and public libraries, schools were asked several questions on their use of the public service. Only 34.5% (n=10) confirmed they are located within walking distance to a public library. Considering the distances involved, it is no surprise that 18 schools (62.1%) do not make use of public libraries. Table 6 sets out how the public library service is used by the 11 remaining schools. This list is informed by the stated services provided by public libraries to post-primary schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2015a).

**Table 6. Schools' use of public libraries**

| Use of public library | Number of responses |
| --- | --- |
| Class Visits to the Library | 9 (81.8%) |
| A Library Card for Teachers | 1 (9.1%) |
| A Presentation on the Library Services | 2 (18.2%) |
| Relevant Library Resources – curriculum and online support materials | 4 (36.4%) |
| Study Space in the Library Branch | 4 (36.4%) |
| Resources and Assistance to Students and Teachers for Project Work and Research, within the Branch or Electronically | 3 (45.5%) |
| Support for Strengthening Students' Reading Skills | 3 (27.3%) |
| Local History Resources, in branch and online | 4 (36.4%) |

Overall, this subset of findings reveals a low level of engagement with the public library service as contained in Department of Education circulars to schools.

### Professional Development

The overwhelming majority of the people looking after the library (75.9%, n=22) never pursue professional development in aspects of school library provision, while 20.7% (n=6) occasionally do. Furthermore, 93.1% (n=27) do not have membership of school library association networks (e.g., LAI SLG, IASL, IFLA, etc). These findings are unsurprising, considering that for many schools the management of the library is on a voluntary basis.

### Leading School Library Provision

When asked to select from a series of statements the one which best describes the primary driving force behind the provision of the school library service in the school, the English Department was selected by 55.2% (n=16). This is unsurprising, considering the key role members of the English Department play in provision of library service in the surveyed schools. The school's in-school management was selected by 20.7% (n=6) of respondents, while the 24.1% (n=7) who selected Other indicated the following: students (n=1), teachers (n=3), and the JCSP Demonstration Project (n=1). One respondent indicated that no one at present was driving provision and one indicated that the question was not applicable. It should also be noted that no respondents chose the school's patron body, the school's board of management, or the parents association as an option for this question.

In regard to planning for the library, participants were also asked if there was a school library policy in place in their school. Only (13.8%, n=4) of schools indicated they have a library policy, leaving an overwhelming majority having no such policy in place (86.2%, n=25).

### *Usefulness and Impact of the School Library*

Participants were asked to give their personal assessment of the usefulness of the school library service for students and to indicate how they feel the library affects the academic performance of students. Tables 7, 8 and 9 contain the findings.

**Table 7. Rating of the usefulness of the school library service for students**

|  | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very useful | 8 | 27.6 | 27.6 | 27.6 |
| Useful | 6 | 20.7 | 20.7 | 48.3 |
| Fairly useful | 7 | 24.1 | 24.1 | 72.4 |
| Of little use | 6 | 20.7 | 20.7 | 93.1 |
| Of no use | 2 | 6.9 | 6.9 | 100 |
| Total | 29 | 100 | 100 |  |

**Table 8. Rating of how the school library service affects the academic performance of students**

|  | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very much | 4 | 13.8 | 13.8 | 13.8 |
| Quite a lot | 9 | 31.0 | 31.0 | 44.6 |
| Not much (a little) | 10 | 34.5 | 34.5 | 79.3 |
| Very little | 3 | 10.3 | 10.3 | 89.7 |
| No effect | 3 | 10.3 | 10.3 | 100 |
| Total | 29 | 100 | 100 |  |

**Table 9. Rating as to how the school library is valued in the school**

|  | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---:|---:|---:|---:|---:|
| Highly valued | 4 | 13.8 | 13.8 | 13.8 |
| Somewhat valued | 12 | 41.4 | 41.4 | 55.2 |
| Valued very little | 11 | 37.9 | 37.9 | 93.1 |
| No effect | 2 | 6.9 | 6.9 | 100 |
| Total | 29 | 100 | 100 |  |

### *Most Challenging Aspects of School Library Provision*

An open-ended question asked participants to outline the single most challenging aspect of school library provision for them. Their responses focus on the following: a lack of resources, time, funding, a designated space, and professional development, a lack of interest in the service, behavioral issues among students, and a lack of capacity to promote the library to school staff. Other challenges listed are the voluntary nature of staffing, as well as inadequate and irrelevant collections.

When asked what single measure would assist the participants in resolving the challenges they face in the effective provision of their school library service, the key recommendations included: funding to employ a professional librarian to coordinate;  manage and promote the service; funding and resources to provide a designated space and develop a relevant collection; awareness raising nationally about the importance, and impact of school libraries on students and the services that potentially could be provided; promotion of the library services among staff and students in the school; and scheduling of library time into the teaching day.

## Discussion

This study of 29 schools within one of the four provinces in the Republic of Ireland illuminates the reality of school library provision, where it exists. The key research questions are as follows: Are there school libraries in post-primary schools in Connacht? Where school libraries exist in this region, how are these resourced, managed and used by the school community?  Of the 102 post-primary schools in the province, only 55 confirmed that they have a library of which 29 participated in the study. In terms of how these are resourced, managed and used, the impact of inadequate state funding and the lack of a national policy supporting school library services is very much in evidence. Only one school benefits from a professional librarian, in this case one of the 30 state-funded libraries that are part of the JCSP Demonstration Library Project (JCSP Support Service, 2005, 2008). As a result, only 31% of schools provide library access throughout the whole school day and in many schools, access is occasional, including during specific classes or only when library supervision is available. The vast majority of schools are dependent on staff volunteerism, in particular involving teachers of English. Schools employ a variety of approaches to funding library resources including use of the school's already stretched annual budget and a range of fundraising ventures. Schools

also avail of book donations from an array of sources. Indeed, there would appear to be an emphasis among participants on how to fund or acquire books, above other aspects that require funding.

Despite lack of funding, 44.8% of schools have a dedicated room for the library while in all other schools no such space is available. This figure is well below the average number of dedicated school library spaces in schools in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, bearing in mind the definition in this instance specifies a curated collection of resources (Great School Libraries, 2019). The competing demands for space within schools is noticeable in that schools also use the designated library space for a range of non-library related uses including as a classroom, learning support, counseling, storage and as a waiting area for sick students. Such practices can undermine the effective use of the space to promote effective social behavior and learning (Great School Libraries, 2019; Loh et al., 2017). Schools mainly use the library for browsing, reading, and taking out/returning books. A substantial majority stated that they do not provide access to online resources, precluding use of digital resources in the library space. Surprisingly, 89.7% of libraries do not provide classes in information skills to students despite the fact that it is a key competency of both the Junior and Senior Cycle Key Skills Frameworks (Department of Education and Skills, 2015b; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2015, 2017). There is a broad variety of library holdings in the surveyed schools, although there is a very strong focus on the provision of reading materials in hard copy format rather than in digital format. For the most part, the surveyed schools do not have a collection related to local studies (Coghlan et al., 1999). Over half the schools have 1,000 holdings or less. The data in regard to two schools in particular, one having 10,000-20,000 holdings and the other 20,000-50,000, is surprising, and indicates a huge commitment to their school libraries, particularly given that neither receives dedicated library funding from the state.

One could argue that the very existence of the 28 libraries not receiving dedicated state funding demonstrates the commitment and determination of schools, and in particular English Departments that are reportedly the main drivers of the library service in many schools. This backs up the claim by SLARI (2016) that non-state-funded school libraries exist due to the interest and enthusiasm of individuals within schools. Given the voluntary nature of provision, however, it is unsurprising that the overwhelming majority of staff involved in the library do not pursue professional development related to the provision of a library service and only 2 of the 29 schools are members of a school library association. Considering the inconsistency across schools in terms of staffing, facilities, holdings, and access, it is not surprising that participants indicate very mixed perceptions in relation to the usefulness and impact of the school library as well as how valued the library service is within the school. On one hand, those driving the service demonstrate a clear commitment despite the lack of stimulus and support and on the other hand, it is difficult for staff to have an appreciation of the full potential of a school library service when they do not experience one operating as it should (Barrett, 2010; Gretes, 2013).

Remarkably, many schools have developed systems for organizing and cataloging library collections, with over a third of schools using a computerized cataloging system. Notwithstanding the sheer commitment demonstrated by schools and teachers to the provision of a library service within an education system that does little to encourage such services for students, the systems in place in most libraries fall short of international standards. Over half of schools in the study do not organize fiction alphabetically or use the Dewey Decimal System, and almost 40% have no cataloging system in place. Public libraries can be important providers of access to reading materials and offer a number of services to post-primary schools (Libraries Ireland, 2022). However, given

that the vast majority of schools in the survey are not within walking distance to a public library it is understandable that most schools confirmed they do not use the public library. There is a disconnect between what is happening in many schools in regard to use of the public library service and the Department of Education policy to promote links between the two (Department of Education and Skills, 2015; 2017).

In conclusion, this study found that state support for school library services in the Republic of Ireland is out of line with education policy and funding measures for school libraries in developed countries internationally (American Librarian Association, 2019; Great School Libraries, 2019; Scottish Government, 2018). Out of a total of 101 post-primary schools in the province, 45 schools confirmed that they do not have a school library, defined for the purpose of this study as any provision to students of access to books, reading materials or items of information in any format and in any space. Where school libraries exist, the lack of state support has resulted in conditions and challenges for school library provision that are comparable to those of developing countries (Shonhe, 2019) and are not in line with the IFLA School Library Guidelines (IFLA, 2015) or SLARI (2016) recommendations. Schools and teachers that promote and manage school libraries, despite inadequate funding, demonstrate admirable commitment to the provision of school library services. While the state funds 30 JCSP libraries, which are models of best practice, 700 post-primary schools remain without such assistance. The pseudo support that is offered occasionally by the Department of Education is inadequate to meet the needs of the school-going population and indeed, could be argued, the effective delivery of national curricula. It appears that the Department of Education is unwilling to commit to a more coherent approach to school library provision, either unaware of or unconvinced of its many benefits.

This study supports the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2022) that the Irish Government should develop a national strategy for school libraries and establish school libraries in all mainstream schools. The authors acknowledge the relatively small scale of the study, focusing on provision in 101 post-primary schools in one province of the country. Further research into school library provision in the remainder of the country could usefully investigate if the findings of this study are replicated elsewhere.

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### Notes

1. The Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) is a Department of Education intervention that provides additional support to students engaging in the Junior Certificate and is provided in 223 post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland.
2. The Department of Education is referred to by various names in this article due to the official change of name that took place over the past number of decades. In 1997 it was named the Department of Education and Science, from 2010, the Department of Education and Skills and from 2020 it is known as the Department of Education.

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# Appendix: Survey of School Libraries

For the purposes of this questionnaire, "school library service" may be defined as follows: any provision to students of access to books, reading materials or items of information in any format and in any space.

Please answer in relation to current provision. If your library is temporarily closed due to COVID-19, please report on provision prior to COVID-19.

**Section 1: About your school**

Please indicate your type of school.
A. Voluntary secondary school
B. Community school/comprehensive school
C. Education and Training Board school
D. Gaelscoil

Which of the following describes your school?
A  Fee-paying
B. Non-fee paying

Please indicate your student enrollment for 2021/2022.
A. less than 200 students
B. 200 to 500 students
C. 500 to 1,000 students
D. above 1,000 students

**Section 2: Space Catering for School Library**

Which one of the following statements best describes the space where your school library service is located?
A. A dedicated room used specifically for the library.
B. A space in a classroom from which the library service is operated.
C. A space in a corridor from which the library is operated.
D. Other

If other, please specify.

If you have indicated A in the answer to the previous question, please indicate to what degree the dedicated library room is used for ordinary timetabled class purposes:
A. Never
B. Sometimes
C. Always

In relation to the space where the collection is housed, and thinking about how the space is used, please tick all that apply:
    A.  Browsing (i.e., Looking through the shelves for books/items)
    B.  Dealing with issues and returns
    C.  Reading
    D.  Research
    E.  Quiet study
    F.  Student access to online resources/computer use
    G.  Teachers bring class groups to borrow/return books to the library
    H.  Teachers bring class groups to carry out research/project work using library resources.

I.   Teachers allow students to go to the library during timetabled class
J.   Library activities such as craft work, clubs (chess, Lego, board games, maths club), etc.
K.   Hosting visitors to the library e.g., authors, artists, musicians, guest speakers, etc.
L.   Hosting library events attended by parents, family etc.
M.   Hosting library events attended by members of the public
N.   A space where students on detention or removed from class are sent
O.   Other

If other, please specify.

### Section 3: People Providing the School Library Service

Which one of the following statements best describes the main person(s) providing the school library service?
A.  A qualified librarian, employed by the school.
B.  A member of staff whose post duties include responsibility for the school library service.
C.  A member or members of the English Department (non-post holder).
D.  A member or members of staff other than in the English Department (non-post holder).
E.  A non-teaching member of staff employed by the school.
F.  A parent or parents working in the library in a voluntary capacity.
G.  Other

If other, please specify.

Is a Student Library Committee or group of student librarians in place?
Yes
No

### Section 4: Library Holdings
(i.e., the collection of book and non-book items in your school library). The library holdings do not include school textbooks.
A. Fiction books
B. Non-fiction books.
C. Picture books/graphic novels/comics
D. Reading materials in digital format
E. Irish-language books
F. Foreign-language books
G. Reference materials
H. Magazines/Periodicals/Journals
I. Newspapers
J. CDs and DVDs
K. Posters/Charts
L. Audio-visual materials
M. Multimedia Materials
N. Information packs
O. Board games
P. Jigsaw puzzles
Q. Lego
R. Musical instruments
S. 3D items

Which one of the following best indicates the size of your library holdings?
A. Less than 100 items
B. 100 to 500 items.
C. 500 to 1,000 items
D. 1,000 to 2,000 items
E. 2,000 to 5,000 items

F. 5,000 to 10,000 items
G. 10,000 to 20,000 items
H. 20,000 to 50,000 items
I. 50,000 to 80,000 items
J. 80,000 to 100,000 items
K. More than 100,000 items

Does your library service provide user access to online resources?
Yes
No

Does your library have a collection related to local studies?
Yes
No

With regard to the fiction in your holdings, is it organized alphabetically by author name?
Yes
No

With regard to the non-fiction in your holdings, is it organized under the Dewey Decimal System or some other system?
Yes
No
Other

If other, please specify.

Which catalog type is used in the library?
A. No catalog in place
B. Notebook/copy
C. Card
D. Computerised

Is there a weeding policy in place in the library? (i.e., a policy of permanently removing materials that are outdated, unused or damaged).
Yes
No

**Section 5: Access**

Which of the following best describes user access to the library each week?
A. Each day before school, throughout the whole school day, and after school.
B. Each day, throughout the school day, but not before and after school.
C. Throughout most of the week. The library is closed on certain days or parts of days because the person who looks after the library has other duties attended to elsewhere in the school.
D. During breaks/lunch time only
E. During English classes only
F. Only during certain subject classes when the subject teacher brings a class to the library.
G. Only irregularly, when the person(s) looking after the library is (are) available
H. Other

If other, please specify.

**Section 6: Funding**

Thinking about the way the library is funded, please tick all of the ways below that apply:

A. Funded as a JCSP Demonstration Library Project.
B. Funded as part of the school's annual budget.
C. Funded by school fundraising.
D. Funded by parents' association fundraising.
E. Funded from education sector resources such as the JCSP Programme, etc.
F. Funded by monies received from philanthropic or charitable foundations/organizations.
G. Funded by occasional sources such as donations, monies obtained by funding that becomes available from various public or State schemes, sponsorship of books or other items, Readathon, etc.
H. Funded by monetary awards for success in events organized by the library or the school.
I. Other.

If other, please specify.

## Section 7: Provision of Information Skills Education

Do the people providing the school library service give classes in information skills to students?
Yes
No

If you answer A. to the above, which one of the following statements best describes the classes provided?
A. Mainly to first year classes only
B. Mainly to junior cycle classes only.
C. Mainly to senior cycle classes only.
D. Mainly to TY classes only.
E. To classes at junior and senior level.

## Section 8: Planning for the School Library

Does the school have a school library policy in place?
Yes
No

## Section 9: Using Public Library Services

At what distance is the nearest public library located from your school?
A. Sufficiently within walking distance to bring a class to the public library for a class visit during timetabled classes, weather permitting.
B. Between 0 to 5 km from the school.
C. Between 5 to 10 km from the school
D. More than 10 km from the school.

If more than 10 km, please indicate how far, approximately?

Does your school make use of public library services?
Yes
No

If you answered Yes to the previous question, please indicate how many of the following public library services did your school avail of in the past year? Tick all that apply.
A. Class visits in the library
B. A library card for teachers
C. A presentation on library services
D. Relevant library resources. These are reading and curriculum support materials and online learning resources.
E. Study space in the library branch

F. Resources and assistance to students and teachers for project work and research, within the branch or electronically.
G. Support for strengthening student reading skills.
H. Local history resources, in branch or online.

### Section 10: Membership of School Library Association Networks

Which one of the following best describes your situation in regard to school library association networks, e.g., Library Association of Ireland School Libraries Group (formerly the School Library Association in the Republic of Ireland i.e., SLARI), School Library Association (UK), International Association of School Librarianship (IASL), the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), etc?
A. The individual/s working in the school library is/are members of a school library association.
B. The school is a member as an institution of a school library association.
C. Neither of the above.

### Section 11: Professional Development

How often do (does) the person(s) looking after the school library pursue professional development in aspects of school library provision?
A. Never
B. Occasionally
C. Annually

### Section 12: Who Drives the Provision of the School Library Service?

A. School's patron body
B. School's board of management
C. School's in-school management i.e., Principal and senior management
D. The English Department
E. The parents' association
F. Other

If other, please give details.

### Section 13: Impact of Covid-19 on your School Library Service
A. No impact. We have been able to continue the usual service we provide.
B. The library is closed but we have been able to provide a limited service.
C. The library was closed for periods since March 2020 but is now open again and we are able to continue the usual service we provide.
D. The library was closed for periods since March 2020. It has now reopened but the service we would usually provide continues to be restricted.
E. The library is closed on an ongoing basis, and we have had to discontinue the service we normally provide.

### Section 14: Use and impact of the School Library

How would you rate the usefulness of the school library service for the students?
A. Very useful
B. Useful
C. Fairly useful
D. Of little use
E. Of no use

How, do you feel, does using the school library service affect academic performance of students in the school?

A. Very much
B. Quite a lot
C. Not much (a little)
D. Very little
E. No effect

How, in your opinion, is the school library service valued in your school?
A. Highly valued
B. Somewhat valued
C. Valued very little
D. Not valued

What, in your opinion, is the single most challenging aspect of school library provision in your school?

What one measure, in your opinion, would assist you most in resolving this challenge?