Editorial

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Guest editorial: information literacy in schools

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As an area of scholarly interest and professional practice, information literacy (IL) spans almost five decades, with its beginnings in both the burgeoning growth of information in the 1950s and 1960s and the professional opportunities enabled by this growth in term of maximising collection, access, dissemination and use of this information. From this time, the rapid growth of libraries and establishment of school libraries in many countries the across the world fostered the development of library-based instruction, and laid the foundations for IL as a conceptual and professional framework for engaging and empowering people to connect with, interact with and purposefully utilise the richness and diversity of information available to them.

The UNESCO/IFLA School Library Manifesto, ratified in 1999 and now translated into 35 languages, established the development of IL as core work of school libraries (UNESCO 1999). Based on the core principle that the school library is the school's physical and virtual information commons and key to students’ information-to-knowledge journey, as well as their personal, social and cultural growth, IL is positioned as an educational framework for articulating the cross-curricular and shared instructional role of school librarians to ensure that students have the fundamental information and lifelong learning capabilities to function successfully in today’s information and knowledge-based society - one increasingly driven by information technology for learning, work and living.

At the same time, recent developments in the digital information landscape have raised questions about the sustainability of school libraries. The transformation of information provision and access through digital devices, the changing arena of content publishing including apps-driven access, the changing culture of reading and literacy development, and the emergence of new technology frontiers for learning such as virtual worlds and digital gaming, have generated important questions about the future, function, format, facilities, and funding of school libraries and their relevance in schools. Yet these very developments raise key questions about intellectual rigor in learning through engagement with information, and highlight the vital importance of the school library as a learning commons, not merely an information place, but as a multi-disciplinary pedagogical centre where the mosaic of information is transformed into deep knowledge and understanding, and where meaningful inquiry is respected and pursued, helped and nurtured in safe and critical ways through curriculum-centred instruction. This culture of deep reading and learning is underpinned by the core competencies and dispositions that characterise IL: accessing, integrating and evaluating multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats, analysing and synthesising multiple interpretations and ideas, identifying and addressing conflicting information, and creating meaningful knowledge products which represent depth of knowledge.

A key challenge to ensuring that the role of school libraries in the intellectual, social, cultural and personal development of young people is recognised and valued is the research agenda that demonstrates the role and impact of school libraries. This must be an international agenda, so that a holistic picture is created. Each piece of research is important, for through each piece we continue to connect the dots, so to speak, of the role of school libraries, their IL instructional programs, and learning outcomes. The three papers focusing on school libraries and their IL initiatives in this special section of the Journal of Information Literacy help us do just that, and give weight to their collaborative instructional role in the learning agenda of schools.

Rodney-Wellington’s quasi-experimental comparative study titled “An examination of information literacy instruction on the information seeking skills of primary school children in Jamaica: an experiment using grade six students” showcases how a coherently structured programme for IL instruction not only helps students learn, but highlights some of the challenges and learning gaps...
when such IL instruction is not undertaken as part of a curriculum programme. Based on pre- and post surveys and a range of IL interventions, the paper highlights the value of engaging young children in the primary school in IL development, and providing them with the foundation of competencies for searching, research and using information to successfully complete class assignments. Comparative quantitative data show that even when seemingly basic information handling skills are not developed, this impacts their learning journey, and that IL instruction has a positive effect on the students’ ability to better seek information and be more efficient information researchers.

Søvik’s paper from Norway examines the establishment of IL practices among students at the lower secondary level in two Norwegian schools. Based on survey data and interviews, the paper highlights, as with Rodney-Wellington’s paper, the central importance of instructional intervention in the development of IL capabilities. In addition, it highlights how socio-cultural practices of intervention, dialogue, collaboration and continuous feedback are key to creating a rich learning experience for IL development. This goes beyond perceiving IL simply as a set of technical skills across digital and print environments, to understanding the complexities of the learning environment, the cognitive and critical thinking demands of the curriculum, and the professional capabilities of both teachers and school librarians to prepare students with the complex practices surrounding IL.

Ash-Argyle and Shoham’s paper from Israel titled “Professional self-efficacy and role perception of school librarians and their impact on the development of students' information literacy: an evidence-based study” centres on the perspective of school librarians, rather than on the students. As with Rodney-Wellington’s and Søvik’s papers, the central importance of collaborative instruction and shared communication is portrayed as foundational to a strong instructional role in the school so that effective research processes are underpinned by carefully chosen and targeted IL interventions. This is clearly an active and shared role, and fostered through school librarians perceiving themselves to be co-teachers and collaborative partners in the school.

Collectively these papers have key implications for the formal education and ongoing professional development of both school librarians and teachers, and for collaborative instructional design to enable students to engage meaningfully and deeply with the information landscape of which they are an integral part. Indeed, the heart of the school, and not just the school library, is the information-to-knowledge journey of students, a focus on developing deep knowledge and understanding through engagement with information in all its forms, and the development of engaged readers, informed learners and creative producers in their social and cultural environments. The three papers examining information literacy in the school’s context in this issue move us closer to this dream.

References