Insufficient school library provision in Ireland:

Implications for the library and information science profession

Professional Issues Paper

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper identifies poor school library provision in Ireland as a matter of interest to the Irish library and information science community. The purpose of this work is to outline the development of school library provision in Ireland, explore the impacts of the lack of school libraries on the library and information science (LIS) field, and make recommendations appropriate to the findings.

Approach: Existing literature on school library provision in Ireland were reviewed. In the absence of peer-reviewed Irish literature on the topic, this review drew on a wide variety of grey literature and was supplemented by peer-reviewed research from other countries as appropriate.

Findings: This work identified the dearth of school libraries in Ireland as a professional issue insofar as it fails to uphold key professional values, represents a devaluation of library professionals on the part of the Irish Government, and limits the growth and sustainability of the library and information science profession.

Implications and Value: These findings suggest that increasing support for school library provision in Ireland would benefit library and information science professionals through greater recognition and better alignment with professional values. To this end, recommendations for the Irish Government, researchers, and library professionals are included to improve school library provision in Ireland. No other published works have explored the consequences of poor school library provision on the LIS profession; this paper is therefore unique in its focus and can provide a useful lens for future research and discussion.

Introduction

This paper will discuss the dearth of school libraries in the Republic of Ireland[1] as a matter of concern for the library and information science (LIS) profession. The purpose of this work is to outline the development of school library provision in Ireland, explore the impacts of the lack of school libraries on the LIS field, and make recommendations regarding the provision of school libraries in Ireland as appropriate. The literature regarding the limited presence of school libraries in Ireland will be framed with a brief section defining school libraries and their benefits, before describing what is known about historic and current school library provision in Ireland. These topics are explored to contextualise the professional issue and provide the basis for subsequent analysis. The next sections examine various dimensions of this professional issue, namely the way it inhibits the LIS field from achieving professional standards, reflects a devaluation of the LIS profession by the Irish Government, and reduces the visibility and sustainability of the profession. Although the primary focus of the paper is the relationship between the scarcity of school libraries and the LIS profession in Ireland, some additional information on school libraries' relationship with other fields is included throughout the work to deepen the analysis and demonstrate broader relevance. The paper concludes with recommendations for the Irish Government, researchers, and LIS professionals.

[1] Referred to hereafter as 'Ireland'

Literature Review

Effective School Libraries

Though the primary focus of this paper is discussing the shortage of school libraries in Ireland and the implications for the LIS field, this section will define an effective school library and succinctly note its benefits. This information will provide context for discussing the unique nature of school library services and framing their scarcity in Ireland.

Defining high-quality school library services

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) promotes high standards of library service, encourages understanding of the value of libraries, and represents the interests of library professionals worldwide (IFLA, n.d.-a). As a leader in the LIS field, IFLA publishes standards that reflect consensus on principles and best practice for various sectors, issues, and services (IFLA, n.d.-b). The IFLA School Library Guidelines assert that the primary role of school libraries is to enhance and support teaching and learning for all (IFLA School Libraries Section Standing Committee [IFLA School Libraries Committee], 2015). The guidelines note three features that define a school library: (1) a qualified school librarian with roles in instruction, reading and literacy development, library management, collaboration, and community engagement; (2) curated high-quality collections that support formal and informal learning; and (3) a policy and plan for ongoing development (IFLA School Libraries Committee, 2015). Extensive research on the impact of school libraries affirms that the presence of a full-time qualified librarian paired with additional support staff, sufficient funding, and the support of senior management enable the best

learning outcomes (Williams et al., 2013). The research suggests that these factors enable a school library to provide the best possible services via access to physical and virtual resources, library networked technology, librarian instruction, and strong collaboration between librarians and teachers (Williams et al., 2013).

Benefits of school libraries

When a school library is properly resourced, it can have a serious impact on multiple dimensions of a student's experience (Gretes, 2013; Merga, 2021; Teravainen & Clark, 2017; Williams et al., 2013). An overview of the main benefits of school libraries is provided here to highlight their contributions to student academic achievement and wellbeing, which will be referenced in subsequent discussion. There has been extensive research on the ability of school libraries to support students' literacy development (Johnston & Green, 2018; Williams et al., 2013). Many international studies highlight that a qualified school librarian, a well-stocked library, and overall funding support for the library influence reading scores more than socioeconomic, demographic, or other school factors (Baxter & Smalley, 2003; Haycock, 2011; Hughes et al., 2013; Lance & Schwarz, 2012; Lance et al., 2002; Lance et al., 2005; Rodney et al., 2002; Rodney et al. 2003). School libraries also contribute to positive attitudes around reading and learning more broadly which have been linked to academic achievement (Fodale & Bates, 2011; Sullivan & Brown, 2013). Furthermore, these effects are often larger for disadvantaged students (Lance & Schwarz, 2012; Rodney et al. 2002).

Beyond reading and literacy, school libraries support achievement in other academic areas. School libraries are associated with better performance on standardised tests

across a number of subjects (Dow & McMahon-Lakin, 2012; Lance et al., 2010). Research has also suggested that school libraries support students in developing learning capabilities which allow them to meet curricular standards, handle information competently, and build intellectual scaffolds that support further learning (Todd et al., 2010). Some attribute these types of broader learning to the information literacy[2] practices often taught in school library instruction (Herring, 2011; Lance & Schwarz 2012; Smalley, 2004).

While research is not definitive, numerous studies suggest that school libraries support student wellbeing[3] by providing a safe space, encouraging reading for pleasure, and promoting access to health and wellbeing resources (Clark 2010; Fodale & Bates, 2011; Loh & Binny 2025; Merga, 2020; Merga, 2021; Merga, 2025; Shaper & Streatfield, 2012; Slaby, 2025; Small et al. 2010; St. Jean et al., 2017; Sullivan & Brown, 2013). Although school librarians are not explicitly required to support students' wellbeing, this is a quality resonant with IFLA's core value of promoting "social, educational, cultural, democratic, and economic well-being" (IFLA, n.d.-c, para. 5). Furthermore, studies have found that wellbeing is correlated with academic achievement which is more squarely in the remit of school librarians (Brooks, 2014; Kaya & Erdem, 2021).

As a reflection of the availability of published research, these studies are primarily international in scope. However, the limited research that has been conducted in Ireland suggests that many of these benefits are seen in Irish school libraries that are

[2] Information literacy is defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as knowing how to "seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively" (UNESCO, 2023, para. 1).
[3] Wellbeing is defined as the "quality of people's lives and their standard of living, which is a multi-dimensional construct that comprises both objective, material components and subjective, psychological facets" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], n.d., para. 1)

well provisioned and have professionally qualified librarians (Cassidy, 2012; Henefer, 2008; Nua Research Services, 2005; O'Flanagan, 2022). With an understanding of the qualities and benefits of an effective school library, the subsequent section will describe the absence of widespread high-quality school library services in Ireland.

History and current state of school libraries

The historic development and current state of school library provision in Ireland is not well-documented. There is no official information provided by the Department of Education and Youth (Department of Education) and little research has been done on the topic, none of which is peer-reviewed (O'Brien et al., 2023). To ground subsequent discussion, this literature review will outline the history and current state of school libraries in Ireland, relying primarily on Library Association of Ireland (LAI) Annual Reports and surveys of school library provision with other sources referenced where appropriate. LAI Annual Reports mostly contain documentation of advocacy efforts which can be utilised as a way of identifying features and perceived deficits of school library provision at the time of the report, particularly through the lens of LIS professionals. In subsequent sections, additional literature is critically reviewed to analyse different dimensions of this professional issue.

Late 1990s - 2000

Little information is available regarding school library provision prior to this period; therefore, the review begins in the late 1990s. From 1970 to 2008, the Department of Education provided an annual School Library Grant to public libraries for the purpose of purchasing books for primary schools with occasional one-time grants provided directly to schools (Ask About Ireland, n.d.; Haslett, 2002). This was the only

documented evidence of government support for school libraries, and the grant was limited exclusively to primary schools. The LAI noted that such funds were insufficient to purchase even one book per pupil per year and that local library authorities spent additional funds from their own budgets in support of school libraries (Haslett, 2002; LAI,1998; LAI, 1999; LAI; 2001). During this time, the LAI advocated for an increase in the amount of the School Library Grant and for government-funded research to survey the current state of primary school library provision (LAI,1998; LAI, 1999; LAI, 2001). Advocacy on both of these efforts were successful, however advocacy around using the research to develop a comprehensive school library service to primary and secondary schools was not (LAI, 2001).

2001 - 2018

In 2001, a major development occurred when the Department of Education funded 10 libraries as part of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), an intervention for potential early school leavers which emphasises development of basic skills, particularly literacy and numeracy, to create a strong educational foundation (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2010; Nua Research Services, 2005). These JCSP Libraries are professionally staffed and operate in educationally disadvantaged schools throughout the country (JCSP, n.d.-b; JCSP, n.d.-c). The JCSP Libraries were expanded in 2005 as part of the launch of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme which was initiated to close the achievement gap between students in educationally advantaged and disadvantaged schools (Department of Education, 2005). The 2005 DEIS Action Plan committed to the creation of 50 JCSP Libraries, though to date only 30 have been opened (Department of Education, 2005;

JCSP, n.d.-b). These are the only government-funded, professionally staffed school libraries in Ireland (Ma et al., 2020).

In 2002, a review of primary school libraries in Ireland was funded by the Department of Education and conducted by the LAI (Haslett). The study reported that of 726 respondents, more than 60% lacked a school library[4] (Haslett, 2002). More than 70% of the schools with a school library reported that a teacher was the primary person responsible for the library (Haslett, 2002). The report notes that nearly all aspects of primary school libraries were found unsatisfactory by teachers, librarians, and parents (Haslett, 2002).

In 2008, the School Library Grant was discontinued and there were considerable efforts from the LAI to petition the government to restore this funding (LAI, 2010; LAI, 2011; LAI, 2012; LAI, 2013). The LAI and the School Library Association of the Republic of Ireland (SLARI) called upon the government to take responsibility for the provision of school library services, including conducting more research on the current state of school libraries and committing funds for development and maintenance of school libraries in primary and post-primary schools (LAI, 2011; SLARI, 2016).

2019 - present

In 2019, a survey conducted by Ma et al. (2020) was the first attempt to capture the full extent of school library provision in the Republic of Ireland. At the time of the 2019 survey, there were 3,240 primary and 723 post-primary schools in Ireland (Department of Education, 2026a), of which 785 primary schools and 353 secondary schools

[4] Defined in the study as a room whose current main function is as a library

responded (Ma et al., 2020). This is the most comprehensive survey of school libraries to date.

Of the primary schools that responded, 47% indicated that they have a dedicated school library space (Ma et al., 2020). However, the authors note that the descriptions of the library spaces varied significantly, from a collection of books in a classroom to a dedicated library room (Ma et al., 2020). Of the primary schools with a library space, approximately 95% indicated that the library was volunteer-run, only five schools responded that their library was run by a professionally qualified librarian (0.6% of all respondents) (Ma et al., 2020). Most primary schools with a library indicated that their book stock relied on donations and that no weeding policy was in place (Ma et al., 2020).

81% of secondary school respondents indicated that their school had a dedicated library space, however only 19% of responding schools had a professionally qualified librarian on staff (Ma et al., 2020). Subsequent analysis found that responses from JCSP and fee-paying schools (which are more likely to have a professional librarian) were overrepresented, meaning that the true percentage of secondary schools with a professional librarian is likely much lower (Eivers, 2024; O'Dea, 2016). Nevertheless, the majority of secondary schools reported that the library was run by volunteers and without a weeding policy (Ma et al., 2020). Respondents across primary and secondary schools both highlighted the difficulty of managing the school library without dedicated staff, space, or funding (Ma et al., 2020).

In 2021, SLARI joined the LAI and became the LAI School Libraries Group (SLG; LAI, 2022). Subsequently, the SLG sections of the LAI Annual Reports detail a number of

advocacy efforts focused on prompting the Department of Education to expand the JCSP Library Project to the originally promised 50 schools, establish a national advisory group for school library provision, and expand JCSP Digital Library services to all second level schools (JCSP, n.d.-a; LAI, 2022). The LAI SLG also contributed to discussions with the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Innovation, Research and Science (Joint Committee on Education) on the subjects of Leaving Certificate reform, support for displaced Ukrainian students, and mental health supports in schools (LAI, 2023).

In 2022, the Department of Education provided a one-time literary resource grant of €21 per student to primary and post-primary schools in the Free Education Scheme (i.e. non-fee-paying schools). These funds were to be used solely for the purchasing of books, audiobooks, and other media for the school library, and not other school library-related expenses (e.g., staffing or space; Eivers, 2024).

In 2023, O'Brien et al. conducted a study of school library provision in post-primary schools in the Connacht province of western Ireland. Out of 101 post-primary schools in the Connacht region, 55 confirmed they had a library and 29 of those schools took part in additional surveying (O'Brien et al., 2023). Their findings align with those of Ma et al. (2020) with regard to the voluntary nature of library staffing, the lack of weeding policies, reliance on book donations, and challenges with lack of funding for staff, space, and collections (O'Brien et al., 2023). O'Brien et al. (2023) further describe that 65.5% of the libraries surveyed report having no access to online resources and 89.7% report offering no classes on information skills. Additionally, 37.9% of libraries surveyed have no catalogue and 86.2% have no school library policy (O'Brien et al., 2023). Lastly,

the surveyed libraries report highly variable and irregular access to the library space (O'Brien et al., 2023).

In summary, the little research that has been done suggests that there are few school libraries in Ireland and even fewer professionally qualified school librarians. The quality of service provision in schools with libraries is generally low with reports of inconsistent access, lack of weeding policies, cataloguing, or library policies, reliance on book donations, and limited funding and resources. Few school libraries in Ireland could be deemed successful at meeting IFLA's definition of an effective school library (IFLA School Libraries Committee, 2015). Despite some developments over the decades supporting more consistent, high-quality school library services, the overall state of school library provision in Ireland has not yet come close to reaching what is mandated by LIS professional standards. The next section explores this statement in further detail.

Part I: Professional Values

One dimension of the professional issue of poor provision of school libraries in Ireland is its failure to honour LIS professional values and guidelines. Significantly, the current state of school library provision does not ensure equitable access to information and library services. This will be demonstrated through analysis of current shortcomings in accessing school and public library services.

Professional values and standards

There are a number of professional LIS institutions which assert the need for more school library services. These institutions set the tone and guidelines for the LIS profession and reflect consensus within the community around standards of practice. As previously described, IFLA is one such organisation that does so at an international level and strives to provide guidelines and recommendations that are both aspirational and realistic (IFLA School Libraries Committee, 2015). The core values defined by IFLA for their work, and by extension the work of LIS professionals, are as follows:

> - The endorsement of the principles of freedom of access to information...
>
> - The belief that people, communities and organizations need universal and equitable access to information ... for their social, educational, cultural, democratic and economic well-being
> - The conviction that delivery of high quality library and information services help guarantee that access
> - The commitment to promote and value diversity and inclusion, notably as regards age... (n.d.-c, para. 5)

Further, IFLA's School Library Guidelines affirm the need for high-quality school library provision, staffed by qualified school librarians and supported with funding and legislation, for all students and teachers (IFLA School Libraries Committee, 2015). The International Association of School Librarianship (IASL) echoes similar sentiments, as does the LAI School Libraries Group which asserts in its mission statement that every school in Ireland should have a school library run by a school librarian (IASL, n.d.; LAI, 2022). The guidelines set by these professional organisations are grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which was ratified by Ireland in 1992 and which asserts the right to equal opportunity in education and information (IASL, n.d.; IFLA School Libraries Committee, 2015; Ombudsman for Children, n.d.; SLARI, 2016). Subsequent discussion will demonstrate why the current state of school library provision in Ireland fails to honour these values and standards.

Unequal access to school library services

The current state of school library provision in Ireland does not reflect the LIS professional value of equitable access to information in a number of ways. There is unequal distribution of school library services among different types of schools and unequal access to public library services. It is commonly believed that the majority of the 51 fee-paying secondary schools in Ireland have a school library with a full-time librarian, though data have not been published to support this assertion (Department of Education, 2026b; O'Dea, 2016). It is known that 30 additional secondary schools have a full-time librarian through the JCSP Library Project (JCSP, n.d.-b). Ma et al.'s (2020) research suggests that up to 19% of secondary schools in Ireland have a school library with a professionally qualified librarian, although as previously discussed the actual

percentage is likely lower. Thus approximately 80% of Irish schools lack a full-time librarian who can deliver high-quality library provision, library instruction, and curricular support; this represents considerable disparity in access to high-quality school library services. The situation is even more severe at the primary level with fewer than 1% of respondents to Ma et al.'s (2020) study reporting they had a school library run by a professionally qualified librarian.

Unequal access to public library services

The Department of Education has promoted the use of public library services as a replacement for school library provision, but this solution does not provide equitable access to information either (Houses of the Oireachtas [Oireachtas], 2026b). The *Literacy, Numeracy, and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033* does not mention school libraries, but states that public libraries can support literacy goals through partnerships with schools described in the National Public Library Strategy (Department of Education, 2023a). The National Public Library Strategy positions the Right to Read Programme as the main service provided in support of schools, but all of the activities in the programme are dependent on parents or teachers transporting students to the public library, or public librarians visiting schools (Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, 2023; Libraries Ireland, n.d.).

Research conducted in Ireland has shown that school partnerships with public libraries or voluntary use of the public library are not reliable ways for students to access library services, in part due to considerable barriers to accessing public library services. About 35% of primary and secondary schools surveyed report being within walking distance of a public library which means nearly two-thirds of schools face a considerable barrier to

bringing students to the public library (Haslett, 2002; O'Brien, 2023). Studies have also reported low levels of outreach visits from public libraries, with one study finding that only 40% of schools reported the public library organising any activity for students within the last two years (Haslett, 2002). Although some schools receive visits from mobile libraries, these services are described as inadequate due to the lack of space and time (e.g., some visits can be as short as 15 minutes; Eivers, 2024).

Many Irish students are also not visiting the public library outside of school. One study found that roughly half of third and fifth class pupils reported never using the public library (Eivers, 2024). Another found that more than 50% of parents with a five-year-old child report bringing them to the public library hardly ever or never; this study also reported that library visits were significantly higher in families with a higher income or level of education than those with lower income or lower education levels (Smyth, 2016). A survey of public library services for teenagers found that about half of young people surveyed were members of the library and noted that respondents in disadvantaged areas were 4 times more likely to never have been a member of a public library than their peers in non-disadvantaged areas (McGrath et al., 2010). The same study identified that little space or collection budget was allocated to young people, and that 45% of library staff had no training in working with young people (McGrath et al., 2010). Considering the importance that young people place on friendly staff, comfortable spaces, and interesting reading materials, public libraries may not be adequately equipped to meet these needs (Loh & Binny, 2025).

These studies collectively suggest that the interaction between students and public libraries is sparse in schools due to geographic barriers, limited visits from public

librarians, and limited time during any visits that do occur. Young people are also not visiting public libraries outside of school consistently, and the frequency of visits are correlated with socioeconomic variables further pointing to unequal access to library provision. Unequal distribution of school library services and unequal access to public library services mean the core IFLA values of providing universal and equitable access to information are not being upheld (IFLA, n.d.-c). Inconsistent interaction with public library services is not comparable to effective school library provision and its benefits described in the literature review; this is because these benefits were found to be linked to factors such as abundant access to library space and resources and the presence of a qualified librarian involved in teaching (Williams et al., 2013). In their current form, public libraries cannot provide these same qualities and therefore cannot provide the same benefits. School libraries staffed by a qualified librarian represent the most direct way of ensuring students can access library services because they don't rely on inconsistent access mediated by parents, teachers, distance from a public library, the busy schedules of public librarians, and public library spaces that may be ill-prepared for supporting the information needs of young people. While public libraries benefit students in other ways, they cannot provide the same benefits to students as a school library can.

Part II: Devaluation by the Irish Government

The second thread in the professional issue of the lack of school libraries in Ireland is the devaluation of librarians by the Irish Government. As described in the literature review, government support for school libraries has been sparse despite a number of appeals on the part of library professionals. This section argues that the lack of government support for school libraries reflects a devaluation of library professionals' contributions given the proven connections between the benefits of effective school libraries and the stated goals of the Irish Government.

Lack of government support

Given that schools identified budgetary constraints as a primary limitation to the provision of school library services, government support is essential (Ma et al., 2020; O'Brien et al. 2023). Funding and legislative support is also identified by IFLA as a key requirement in the provision of high-quality school library services. However, as previously discussed, government provision for school library services has been extremely limited. Outside of the JCSP Libraries, government support has almost exclusively taken the form of providing funds to be used in purchasing library materials such as books (Eivers, 2024). As previously described, the Department of Education has also indicated that public libraries are meant to support students in place of school libraries, but there is little evidence that public libraries are able to meet the level of support needed for effective school library provision (Eivers, 2024). This failure to provide consistent support for school libraries that allows for employment of professionally qualified library staff and continuous collection development reflects a serious undervaluation of school libraries and librarians. Given the existence of

previous advocacy efforts which have highlighted the value of school libraries, there have been opportunities for the Department of Education to learn about the potential benefits of school libraries, but the government has nevertheless not supported school libraries in a way that aligns with IFLA standards (for example, LAI, 2023). The sporadic support given to schools reflects an outdated understanding of libraries as repositories of books rather than the active spaces of teaching, learning, participation and collaboration envisioned in IFLA standards (Adetayo et al., 2024; IFLA School Libraries Committee, 2015). Although excellent book collections are a key factor in supporting student learning, they require management and curation in the form of selection, organisation, display, and weeding which are activities non-librarians may not have time or expertise to accomplish (Williams et al., 2013). The current government approach of providing minimal support for collection development and no support for staffing (outside of the JCSP Libraries) means that the key benefits of school libraries are unattainable.

Paradoxically, there is strong alignment between government priorities, challenges currently facing Irish students, and the benefits of school libraries. A brief discussion of these areas of alignment follows which illustrates how school libraries have been overlooked as solutions to these issues, and additionally demonstrates the relevance of this issue outside of the LIS field.

Government prioritisation of literacy and the achievement gap

Developing literacy skills has been a key goal of the Department of Education outlined in documents like the 2011 National Strategy *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life a*nd the more recent *Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024 - 2033*

(Department of Education, 2011; Department of Education, 2023a). Other departments, like the Department of Children, Disability, and Equality (Department of Children), also refer to literacy as a key tool for meeting educational targets and reducing inequality and poverty (2014). The Department of Education has also prioritised reducing educational disadvantage and closing achievement gaps (Department of Education, 2023b). One way that the government has worked towards these goals was through the establishment of DEIS[5] schools to which additional supports were committed (Department of Education, 2005). The DEIS Programme has been updated and expanded a number of times over the decades which demonstrates that this issue is an ongoing priority (Department of Education, 2017; Department of Education, 2026c). Notably the original DEIS Action Plan is the only one to include school libraries as a key partner in achieving the goals of the plan (Department of Education, 2005).

Current state of literacy and the achievement gap

The government prioritisation of literacy as a tool for success is well-warranted. Research has shown that low numeracy and literacy are associated with worse employment opportunities, lower levels of educational attainment, feelings of disconnection from political processes, lower life satisfaction, poorer health, and lower levels of social trust (OECD, 2024). According to the 2022-23 Survey of Adult Skills, 21% of adults in Ireland have low literacy and 25% have low numeracy (OECD, 2024). By contrast Irish youth exhibit higher levels of literacy and numeracy; in 2022 89% were considered proficient in reading and 81% were proficient in mathematics (OECD, 2023).

[5] DEIS stands for Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

Despite the overall strong performance, there were significant differences in scores between socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged students (OECD, 2023; UNICEF, 2026). Although Ireland has made some progress towards narrowing the achievement gap, it still persists across multiple measurements of academic achievement (OECD, 2023; Shiel et al. 2022). This gap in achievement is consequential insofar as educational disadvantage can result in early school leaving, unemployment, and long-term social marginalisation (Government of Ireland, 2000).

Government prioritisation of student wellbeing

Student wellbeing is another area of prioritisation for the Irish Government. Responsibility for children's wellbeing is shared between multiple departments such as the Department of Education and the Department of Children, as well as the government as a whole (Department of Children, 2014; Department of Education, 2018). An array of policy documents further reflect this prioritisation, such as *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice*; *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*; *Young Ireland*; *Sharing the Vision* (Department of Children 2014; Department of Children, 2023; Department of Education, 2018; Department of Health, 2020). Additionally, the Department of Education has recently made changes to include more information about wellbeing in the primary and secondary school curricula which signifies growing importance placed on the topic (Citizens Information, n.d.; Oireachtas, 2026c).

Current state of student wellbeing in Ireland

Despite this emphasis on child wellbeing, Ireland ranks in the bottom half of high-income countries for child wellbeing (UNICEF, 2020). In a 2022 study, about one fifth of

Irish youth reported that they were not satisfied with their lives (OECD, 2023). Further analysis of the results from this study revealed that Irish female students experience poorer wellbeing than their male counterparts across myriad indicators (Nelis et al., 2025).

The previous sections illustrate that there are significant concerns in the areas of literacy, attainment gaps, and wellbeing among students in Ireland and there has been considerable government effort put towards addressing these concerns. However, school libraries, which have been shown to support students with all of these issues, have not been among the solutions supported broadly by the Irish Government and more specifically the Department of Education. This demonstrates a serious devaluation of the LIS profession and the profession's ability to contribute meaningfully towards these issues.

Part III: Missed Opportunities for LIS Success

The devaluation of school library services on the part of the Irish Government is a professional concern not only in its own right, but because it has the effect of further limiting LIS professionals' ability to increase awareness of the value of library services. Given that the vast majority of Irish schools do not have a school library staffed by a professionally qualified librarian, this represents a serious missed opportunity to introduce students to the full scope of what a library is and can do. Additionally, recent labour market research suggests a number of threats to the profession which could be alleviated by more robust school library provision.

Showcasing the library profession

Research has shown that there is a lack of awareness among teachers and administrators regarding the role of a school librarian (Hartzell, 2002; Loh et al., 2021). This research identified that this lack of awareness is due to a lack of visibility of the library in former experiences such as childhood schooling, professional training, and academic literature on education (Hartzell, 2002). Some have argued that this lack of visibility makes school librarians undervalued within the school and more vulnerable to losing their jobs during budget cuts (Hochman, 2016).

Although there is little research on this topic in the Irish context, reports from the JCSP Libraries suggest that there is a similar lack of awareness of the role of a school library and librarian. For example, a report on the establishment of the JCSP Libraries notes that at the beginning of the project many teachers were uncertain what the role of library and librarian were and saw it primarily as a place for borrowing books, reading for pleasure, and supporting English classes (Nua Research Services, 2005). The report

further states that the library was not seen as an active learning space, nor the librarian as an educational partner (Nua Research Services, 2005). This issue with misunderstanding of the breadth of a librarian's role is not isolated to school libraries, as research in public and academic libraries has also shown that many lack awareness of the full extent of library services (Fagan, 2008; McGrath et al. 2010; McGuinness, 2011).

It is possible that having more school libraries in Ireland would allow school communities to better understand the role of school libraries and librarians. Anecdotal evidence from the JCSP Libraries suggests that exposure to high-quality school library services can indeed increase understanding of the scope of librarians' roles and their value (Nua Research Services, 2005). For example, the JCSP librarians ran library in-service programmes for the teachers at their schools and reported that teachers who hadn't previously engaged with the library were eager to explore collaborations, suggesting a greater recognition of the value of school libraries (Nua Research Services, 2005). The sheer number of activities organised for students also demonstrated that the library is more than merely a room with books; libraries hosted reading initiatives, artistic and cultural events, literacy instruction, cross-curricular project support, supported technology initiatives, and fostered connections with parents, public libraries, and younger students (Nua Research Services, 2005). Students, teachers, and principals profusely expressed their appreciation for the librarian's work and articulated how these activities had meaningfully affected students. This contrasts considerably with the lack of awareness and value seen in some studies and even the same JCSP schools at the beginning of the Library Project (Hartzell 2002; Henefer, 2008; Loh et al., 2021; Nua Research Services, 2005).

Making connections with other library services

Beyond having a clearer understanding of the function and value of a school library service, students who interacted with JCSP Libraries reported greater engagement with public library services. Surveys of students at schools with JCSP Libraries found that more than half reported visiting a public library a lot or sometimes (Henefer, 2008). This is more than expected for the age group surveyed and particularly for disadvantaged students as public library use tends to drop off considerably throughout adolescence (Clark & Hawkins, 2011). In a different study, pre- and post-testing shows that after an intervention designed to improve school library provision, students reported greater use of their local public libraries (Eivers, 2024). These findings suggest that strengthening school library provision may in turn strengthen students' relationships with library services more broadly. This may reflect a greater appreciation for library services among students and young people and presents additional opportunities for libraries to serve this demographic.

Experiences in school libraries may also help support a student's transition from second to third level education, particularly in the area of information literacy. Research indicates that this transition can be challenging for students and that instruction in information literacy can help students adjust to the university environment (Briggs, 2016; Sheridan & Dunne, 2012). Prior research has shown that information literacy skills taught in second level education don't automatically transfer to third level education, but that collaboration between school and university librarians and a scaffolded approach can make this skill transfer more successful (Aytac et al., 2025; Herring, 2011; Saunders et al., 2017). Thus, the work of school librarians could

support students in their transition to third level education, especially in terms of confidence and familiarity with library resources, which in turn bolsters the work of university librarians.

Although considerably more research needs to be devoted to this subject, anecdotal evidence suggests that exposure to school libraries can raise visibility of the LIS field overall and showcase the breadth of library services that students may encounter throughout their educational careers and beyond. These assertions align with findings and recommendations from a recent labour market analysis conducted by the LAI which highlighted the need to "change the public perception of the work that is done in a library" and recommends engaging with schools and conducting awareness campaigns as part of the solution (LAI, 2024, p. 8). Current government policy that limits the number of school libraries in Ireland denies librarians the opportunity to bring awareness to LIS services and show the full extent of what libraries can do.

Consequences for professional growth

Not only does the lack of school libraries in Ireland pose a professional issue through inhibiting recognition of the value of library professionals, but also by contributing to issues with the sustainability of the library profession. The LAI Labour Market Taskforce found that job scarcity and high competition are barriers to entry and progression in the LIS profession (LAI, 2024). The ageing Irish LIS workforce in combination with the predicted growing need for librarians suggests that more professionals entering the field is essential (LAI, 2024). One solution posed by the LAI is advocating for job creation of entry and mid-level positions, another is promoting librarianship as a career among students and young people with awareness campaigns and library modules in

schools (2024). There is tremendous potential to increase the number of entry to mid-level library positions if Ireland increases its school library provision, since school library jobs are suitable for early to mid-career librarians (Job Alert, 2025). If every Irish primary and secondary school were to have a librarian this could result in the creation of at least 3,000 new positions which would more than double the current LIS workforce (LAI, 2026). Furthermore, having more school librarians is an excellent way to strengthen entry-level librarians' professional skills as the sheer variety of tasks required of a school librarian could prepare them for more senior roles in different sectors of the LIS profession. More school libraries could also expose students to the possibility of a career as a librarian which could support a long-term influx of new library professionals. Thus, the absence of school libraries creates a limitation to growing the LIS profession in the way recommended by the LAI.

This section has explored how the lack of school libraries contributes to issues with visibility and awareness of the LIS field and limits the growth and sustainability of the LIS profession. It further suggests that increasing school library provision would not only contribute to a stronger understanding of a librarian's role within a school community, but may support connections with other types of libraries. Increasing the number of school library positions in Ireland could also benefit the continued growth and development of the LIS profession. The recommendations section outlines how school library provision might be improved in service of these goals.

Recommendations

In consideration of the different dimensions of the professional issue discussed above, the recommendations section provides different ways of improving and increasing school library provision in Ireland. If acted upon, these recommendations will bring the state of school libraries closer into alignment with LIS professional values, indicate confidence in professional librarians to address issues of importance to the Irish Government, and present opportunities for the LIS profession to showcase its work and support professional growth. These recommendations are separated into actions for the Irish Government, researchers, and LIS professionals.

Government

The Department of Education should work towards creating a national advisory board on school library provision that will create a national school library strategy to eventually provide every school with a school library and qualified librarian. This recommendation aligns with IFLA's School Library Guidelines and recommendations from the LAI as a whole and the LAI SLG specifically (IFLA School Libraries Committee, 2015; LAI, 2022; LAI, 2023). Notably, the Joint Committee on Education has recommended the same actions in reports on mental health supports in schools and leaving certificate reform (Joint Committee on Education, 2022; Joint Committee on Education, 2023). The committee additionally recommended extending the JCSP Digital Library to all Irish schools which would be an excellent first step towards improving school library provision in Ireland (Joint Committee on Education, 2022; Joint Committee on Education, 2023). It is not feasible or reasonable to expect the

Department of Education to implement this immediately, so a phased approach is recommended.

Phase 1

Over two years the Department of Education should create a cross-sectoral national school library advisory board with the aim of producing and implementing a national school library strategy. Expanding the JCSP Digital Library to all Irish primary and post-primary schools should occur as a matter of priority as the relatively low cost and effort put towards expanding a pre-existing digital library could significantly benefit Irish students right away. Phase 1 should also include the expansion of the JCSP Library Project to the originally promised number of 50 schools; since ten schools were previously opened per year, the recommendation to add twenty more schools over two years is feasible (Department of Education, 2005). The Department of Education has noted that further expansion of the JCSP Libraries is contingent on a review; this review has been on hold since 2015 and should be conducted as part of Phase 1 (Department of Education, 2015; Oireachtas, 2026a). Review and expansion of the JCSP Libraries can be used to inform Phase 2, as should the work of the advisory board.

Phase 2

Based on the recommendations of the proposed National School Library Advisory Board outlined in the proposed National School Library Strategy, the Department of Education should work to expand school libraries to every primary and post-primary school in the Republic of Ireland. This should take place over a 10-year period with priority given to primary and secondary DEIS schools. Since 2023, school construction and renovation include adding library space; this should make it easier to develop

libraries in schools that don't already have one set up (Oireachtas, 2023). The government must further commit to support these libraries continuously through the provision of funds for staff and library resources. Beyond these steps, the Irish Government should create a statutory requirement for the provision of school libraries in Ireland. This aligns with IFLA guidelines and has been recommended by researchers in Ireland and the LAI SLG (formerly SLARI; Haslett, 2002; IFLA, 2015; SLARI, 2016)

Acting on these recommendations would be a substantial change from the Department of Education's current approach to school library provision. However, these actions are both necessary and feasible. Given stated government priorities regarding literacy, wellbeing, and achievement gaps and the proven ability of school libraries to support students in these areas, it is sensible for the government to take meaningful action to improve school library provision in Ireland. Although doing so may be costly, Ireland spends the least amount of money on education as a percentage of GDP compared with 41 other countries and the proposed timeline for this plan allows for the opportunity to allocate budgetary resources appropriately (OECD, 2025). There are a number of countries in similar or weaker economic positions than Ireland which have far better school library services, further speaking to the viability of comprehensive school library provision in Ireland (Great School Libraries, 2023; Marquardt, 2010; Rosa, 2019; Sweden Herald, 2025).

Research

A major limitation of this paper is the scarcity of high-quality peer-reviewed academic literature on the topic of school libraries in Ireland. In general, much of the research on school libraries is conducted by advocacy groups and reports which are not peer-

reviewed and therefore may lack the rigour and impartiality of high-quality research (Merga, 2020). Such research would help us better understand topics like the relationship between school libraries and wellbeing, the potential of school libraries to raise awareness of the LIS profession, and the potential ability of school libraries to support practices like information literacy which affect a student's future relationship with library services. It is therefore a recommendation of this paper that much more independent and peer-reviewed research is undertaken to establish a base of high-quality research so that the context of school libraries in Ireland, areas of success and areas to improve, and how school libraries connect to other dimensions of the LIS field may be better understood.

In discussing how to strengthen the research around school libraries and student wellbeing, Merga (2020) makes specific recommendations which are appropriate to the landscape of school library research in Ireland given how underdeveloped the research base is here. Firstly, Merga (2020) contends that partnerships between academic researchers and school librarians are essential; school librarians can provide valuable context, while academic research partners add rigour to the process for stronger research. Merga also recommends that qualitative exploratory research should be undertaken first to allow for subsequent quantitative research to be more targeted and to test for generalisability (2020). Merga notes the importance of sharing findings broadly within and outside of the LIS field, and ensuring that research is translated for a general audience to be more easily shared with educational, governmental, and other relevant disciplines (2020). Lastly, best practices in research on children and youth mandate participatory research that allows young people to contribute their

perspectives on matters that affect them; research on school libraries must take this seriously and ensure children's rights on this matter are respected (Lundy, 2007).

LIS Professionals

There are a number of actions that various LIS professionals and organisations in Ireland can take to ameliorate the professional issue of poor school library provision. Numerous lessons and insights that can be gleaned from other advocacy efforts in support of school libraries and libraries in general. These lessons can be distilled into having a plan, making connections, and framing the issue according to the values of key stakeholders (Albright et al., 2025; Band, 2026; Vanneman, 2007). Research highlights the importance of documenting advocacy efforts and results to inform future work (Ewbank & Kwon, 2015). Of course, advocacy efforts should draw from a strong research base to ensure that arguments are accurate and well-supported (Todd, 2008).

Firstly, within the LIS community in Ireland, there should be broader recognition and understanding of the ways that the lack of school libraries negatively impact the field. There have been some efforts by the LAI as a whole and other subsections of the LAI to support school library advocacy, but this charge has mostly fallen to the LAI School Libraries Group and has been led primarily by Kathleen Moran (K. Moran, personal communication, July 20, 2026). To improve the provision of school libraries in Ireland will take more than the work of one or a handful of dedicated individuals. It is therefore recommended that the LAI SLG focuses on raising awareness of this issue among the broader library community as a way of garnering more support within the LIS community and sharing the workload of advocating for school libraries. These awareness efforts can be grounded in the impact that the lack of school libraries has for

the LIS community as a whole, as has been shown in this paper. The LAI may also consider forming a “library advocacy” group as there is likely interest among members in advocating for the LIS profession as a whole.

Any LIS body that is committed to moving improving Irish school library provision should work to cultivate relationships with allies who might also benefit from more school libraries. These potential allies include educators, school administrators, parents, youth mental health professionals, public librarians, academic librarians, and students. It has been observed that some of these parties in the past have advocated for school libraries, but don’t follow through with their efforts; the role of a school library advocacy group would be to co-ordinate and sustain these efforts (K. Moran, personal communication, July 20, 2026). Part of this task is having a strategic plan with concrete goals and actions. A plan allows advocacy actions to be targeted, tracked, and recorded so that future advocates can learn what was successful or not and what has already been tried (Ewbank & Kwon, 2015). Lastly, all advocacy should be communicated in a way that aligns school libraries with the goals and plans of the target audience. For example, advocates may wish to communicate with youth mental health professionals about the relationship between school libraries and student wellbeing whereas communications targeted at the Irish Government could articulate benefits that align with stated goals, or discuss the economic cost of unmet literacy needs (Band, 2026). Continuing to raise awareness about this issue, present evidence on the benefits of school libraries, and advocate for the work of professional librarians will eventually bring the quality of school libraries in Ireland closer to what is mandated by LIS professional standards and beneficial for Irish students and library professionals.

Conclusion

The purpose of this work was to outline the development of school library provision in Ireland, explore the impacts of the lack of school libraries on the LIS field, and make recommendations appropriate to the findings. Utilising the existing literature on school library provision in Ireland, a summary of major developments over the past 30 years was articulated. Further investigation and analysis exposed three major dimensions of the professional issue of the dearth of school libraries in Ireland. Firstly, the current state of school libraries does not meet IFLA standards or honour LIS professional values regarding equitable access to information. Secondly, despite a significant body of evidence that aligns the benefits of school libraries with the goals and priorities of the Irish Government, the government has shown a disregard for the contributions of professional librarians to this field. Lastly, the lack of school libraries in Ireland creates limitations on showcasing the value of professional librarians and limits the growth and development of the LIS profession. In light of these concerns, recommendations were included for the Irish Government, researchers, and LIS professionals to enhance the understanding of school libraries in Ireland and to increase support for school library provision.

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