
School Libraries in the United Kingdom

MICHAEL RYAN

THE government of the United Kingdom has a name for its education policy; it is called «Diversity and Choice». The aim of this policy is to create variety in the schools sector; to create a range of different sorts of school so that parents can choose a school for their children that best suits their children's needs. In many ways this phase «diversity and choice» can be used to describe the state of school libraries in the United Kingdom, except of course that if you are a child in a school that has no library or has a library that is closed for most of the week then you have very little «choice».

The United Kingdom consists of four provinces, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, each of which has its own education system but each of which is under the overall direction of the central government that is based in London. Most of the 25 000 schools in the United Kingdom are controlled by local councils, these councils being elected by the democratic vote of local people every four years. In addition to these local education authority (LEA) schools there are approximately 2000 private or independent schools. There are also now over 1000 grant maintained (GM) schools, which are former LEA schools that have been allowed by a recent change in the law to leave the control of their local council and instead to receive their funding from a central government agency. We also have a small number of City Technology Colleges (CTCs) which are partly sponsored by local businesses and concentrate on the use of information technology and schools that specialise in certain subjects eg music and the arts.

We also have schools that are run by churches and various religious groups. Whether or not a school has an effective library does not depend on the sort of school it is however it largely depends on the vision and commitment of the headteacher and the school governors. There are excellent libraries to be found in each of these types of school; there are also however many examples of poor or even non-existent libraries to be found in a number of United Kingdom schools. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you exactly how many schools in the United Kingdom have libraries or how much money is spent by schools on their libraries or how many books or computers they have. The government does not collect this information although the Library Association and some universities do attempt to collect and publish whatever statistics they can. Much of the information that I shall give you in this paper is based on the work by the Library Association and these universities.

In general, I can say that most schools in the United Kingdom have a library and that most teachers working in those schools recognise that a library can contribute greatly to their children's education and in particular to their children's ability to learn for themselves. I would also say that most school libraries are managed by teachers or non-teaching assistants and that most of them do not have sufficient time or money to do the job as well as they would wish. Increasingly, schools are appointing professionally qualified chartered librarians to run their libraries. There are approximately 750 chartered librarians working in United Kingdom schools, most of them working in secondary schools (educating children between the ages of 11 and 18) with an extremely small number working in primary schools (for children between 5-11). Some schools are running very sophisticated libraries equipped with up to date information technology such as CD-ROM and with access to the Internet; a good range of books, videos, journals and newspapers, and librarians who work in genuine partnership with teachers. For most schools in the United Kingdom however shortages of staff and resources are hindering the development of their libraries. Again, one thinks of the word «diversity» in a recent survey of school libraries carried by the Library Association (The Library Power Survey Report on Libraries and Young People, HMSO 1 872 088 082) the range of expenditure on books varied from £0.78 (174 esc) per child in one school to £80.00 (17 840 esc) per child in another!!

In 1984 the government published a report called «School Libraries: the foundations of the curriculum» (HMSO, 0 116 307 137). This report provided an extremely valuable statement of what a school library should be, what it could do and what the government and other agencies could do to

improve the existing situation. While many of its recommendations have never been implemented it was still a very influential report and many of the developments that have occurred in the past ten years in many parts of the United Kingdom can be traced back to its publication. Schools in Scotland had already been influenced by an earlier report and by 1984 most Scottish secondary schools had already appointed chartered librarians. In the past twelve months the government has published two more reports. «School Library Services and Financial Delegation to Schools» (HMSO 0 117 019 763) and «Investing in Children: the Future of Library Services for Children and Young People» (HMSO 0 117 019 941). Both of these contain valuable ideas and advice which could greatly improve school libraries in the United Kingdom. The Library Association is working hard to persuade the government to carry out the recommendations of these reports.

One feature of the United Kingdom school library scene that has been very important in encouraging improvements over the years is the existence in most parts of the country of Schools Library Services. These specialist services are usually funded by local education departments but managed by the local public library service and provide schools with a range of facilities such as the bulk loan of books and other materials, special collections on particular subjects, arrangements that enable schools to buy books at a discount, support for information technology, advice and training for teachers and school librarians. There are currently 131 such services in the United Kingdom. There is no law that requires local councils to provide school library services (except in Northern Ireland) and increasingly the budgets of these services are being delegated (ie given) to schools and then schools are being invited to «buy back» the service. In this way school library services are being turned into «businesses», some with more success than other. As with so much of UK education there is a wide variation in practice from place to place, with some school library services providing a range of sophisticated support to schools and some offering little more than the loan of collections of books. 8 local councils do not have school library services and it is known that 2 more will be closing this year. Where school library services do exist they are greatly valued by the schools that use them.

Another organisation that has the potential to change things for the better is the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). This is the government agency responsible for monitoring educational standards in schools. Schools in the United Kingdom are inspected on a regular basis by private teams of inspectors. At present these inspections are supposed to take place every four years. Ofsted provides guidance for these private teams and has

recently published a revised version of its «Handbook for the Inspection of Schools». Unlike the first version this new edition contains guidance on the inspection of school libraries. It is interesting, and important, that this guidance asks the inspection teams to assess not only the quality of library resources that are available in schools but also to assess the educational effectiveness of those resources. Librarians have always known that it is not enough to have books in your library; they have to be the right books and children have to be allowed to have access to them and be taught how to use those books. It is very encouraging that the government's own school inspection agency now seems to recognise this as well. The new handbook will be in use from the summer of 1996 so we can look forward to some interesting reports.

One of the changes that the government has introduced in recent years is a requirement for all schools (except private schools) to publish development plans. The Ofsted inspectors expect schools to produce these development plans and to make any necessary changes to them following an inspection. This means that the managers of all schools have to consider how they wish to improve and develop their schools in the years to come. In many schools this has provided the teacher librarians and librarians with an opportunity to plan the development of their libraries. Various organisations such as local school library services, the Library Association and the School Library Association (which is an independent organisation for all people, not necessarily librarians, who work in schools) have done a great deal of work to help school librarians write their own policy statements and development plans. When doing this many schools have found it useful to refer to the 1984 report «School Libraries: the foundations of the curriculum», where the argument is so clearly made for the library to be seen as the basis for all the learning that goes on in schools.

It is widely accepted by those who manage school libraries that the main purposes of the school library are:

- to encourage reading and to help children develop a love of books
- to provide access to up to date information through books, journals, databases etc.
- to train children how to find and use information for themselves: to develop their information handling skills so that they can become independent learners.

For the library to achieve these aims it is essential for the school librarian to work closely with the teachers and to be involved in the planning of

the curriculum. Those organisations that advise schools on library matters, such as the Library Association and local school library services, recommend that the librarian in a school should have the same status as a head of department or senior teacher. In some schools this is the case and in these schools the librarian is able to influence the planning of the curriculum and is able to ensure that the library can provide the relevant resources for the courses that the children will be studying. In many schools however the full purpose of the library is not so well understood, making it very difficult for the library staff to contribute fully to the curriculum. Where school libraries are most successful it is the result of teachers and librarians working together in partnership. In most United Kingdom schools the headteacher is a very important figure and it is his or her view of the library that can decide whether or not the library is central to the curriculum of the school.

In 1988 the government introduced a National Curriculum that, for the first time in over 100 years, told all schools (except private schools) what subjects to teach and how to teach them. For many school libraries this was good news and bad news. The good news was the National Curriculum required children and teachers to use libraries. The bad news was that throughout the country children and teachers were studying the same subjects, often at the same time, which made it very difficult to find enough books and information for everybody. It is true however that the National Curriculum has made many school libraries much more necessary and relevant to their schools than was the case before 1988.

The subject of «training» is often discussed by people working in school libraries. Currently teachers are trained as teachers, and librarians are trained as librarians. There is no such qualification as «school librarian» and any courses on school librarianship that do exist are short term and are run locally by colleges or school library services and do not lead to any qualification that is recognised nationally. There are about 25000 chartered librarians registered by the Library Association and approximately 2000 of these work either in schools or school library services. There are also many other library workers in schools who are neither teachers nor librarians. Some of these have joined the Library Association as «affiliated members». It is a common feature of United Kingdom schools, especially primary schools, to accept voluntary unpaid help from parents and other family members. It is certain that some schools benefit from having such unpaid help from some chartered librarians, but there is no way of knowing how many these might be. In such cases it would still be a teacher who would have official responsibility for the library. The United Kingdom government

has recently introduced a system for recognising peoples existing skills and providing training so that people can gain further qualifications. This system is called the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) and the Library Association has been co-operating to ensure that library skills become part of the NVQ system. It is quite possible that in future this will help some school library staff, such as affiliated members of the Library Association, to gain formal recognition for their skills.

Developments in information technology have had a big impact on school libraries. In particular the growth of the market for CD-ROMs and the reduction in prices for many of these disks have meant that many schools can obtain large amounts of information in this new format and keep this information up to date without great expense. A large encyclopaedia in printed book form could cost £500 (115 000 esc) or more, but an encyclopaedia on CD-ROM such as «Encarta 95» can cost as little as £50 (11 500 esc). Most children find computers easy and exciting to use and in many schools librarians have found that by buying CD-ROMs they have increased the use being made of the library by children. An independent organisation called the National Council for Education Technology (NCET) has been running a two year research project in the United Kingdom called «Libraries of the Future» which is examining the potential of computers for libraries of all kind. It has included a number of school libraries in this project and is due to publish its final report in 1996.

The use of the Internet is a much more recent development and there are certain problems for schools. It is possible for children to access pornographic, racist and other unsuitable material; it is also possible for the costs to rise very sharply. Some computer companies are offering schools a «safe» Internet service so that teachers and librarians can more easily control what use children are making of it. The present government in the United Kingdom and the main opposition party (there will be a general election in the United Kingdom in 1997) have both announced plans to link every school and public library into the national cable communications network by the year 2000. It is beyond question that the amount of information that children, teachers and librarians can access is vast and is increasing in amount and complexity. If children are not to get lost in this information jungle it is essential that they are guided and educated in how to search for what they really need, how to select what they need and discard what they do not need, and how to make use of what they find through computers. The United Kingdom government has produced a statement on the potential use of this new technology called «Superhighways for Education» (HMSO 0 112 708 986). The Library Asso-

ciation has produced a response to this, emphasizing the central role of the school librarian in managing the use of information technology. Librarians are trained as information managers and both the Internet and the children and school who use it need our help.

School libraries in the United Kingdom have achieved a great deal in recent years and there are many examples of good practice to be found around the country. There are however continuing problems of funding and staffing for both schools and school library services. It is necessary to be optimistic and to fight for the provision of good school libraries. Experience has shown us exactly how valuable they can be.

HELEN FRANCIS JENKINS



I have been working as a Library Media Specialist for the last 12 years and I am currently employed in that capacity by the American International School-Lisbon. I have a Master of Education degree from Portland State University in Portland, Oregon and I am licensed as a Library Media Specialist (for kindergarten through grade 12) by the state of Oregon. I entered this field because it appeared to me to be the most dynamic area of both education and library sciences. That dynamic quality has, in fact, produced dramatic changes in school libraries during the 12 years I have been involved with them and as we move further into the Information Age all signs indicate that this trend will continue.

School libraries media center

School libraries have a long history in the United States and a century of growth and development have produced the current model of a Library Media Center, the information center of the school, playing an integral role in the educational process.

They began in the 1800s as the simple collections of books held by some schools then moved into the 20th century with the hiring of the first school

* *Trabalha de responsabilidade do editor.*