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School Libraries in Iceland: An Update Report

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Educational development in Iceland during the past 10 years has been marked by the advent of information technology. All schools are now linked to the Internet through the Icelandic Educational Network, Ismennt. Primary school libraries have been relatively slow to adopt technology, and the school library has frequently been left out of the automation of the school. Secondary school libraries are more advanced, most of them have now automated their library collections, and secondary school librarians have their own listserv and cooperation committee to lead the development.

The Icelandic Educational System

Since the author's article on Icelandic school libraries was published in the book edited by Lowrie and Nagakura (Hannesdottir, 1991a), considerable changes have taken place in the country's educational system and libraries. The educational structure, however, is unchanged and so are the main limiting factors that affect all development of school libraries, that is, population and demography. A small population of 268,000 people scattered around a geographical area of 103,000 sq km means a large number of small schools that cannot be expected to develop well-equipped school libraries with comprehensive services.

Of the 208 primary schools in the country, 64 (30.8%) have fewer than 50 students and other 33 (15.9%) have 51-100 students. The smallest school has three students. This means that 97, or 46.7%, of the Icelandic primary schools have 100 students or fewer. These 97 schools, however, serve only 13.1 % of the student population. One third of the primary schools have more than 200 students.

There are 37 secondary schools, including trade schools, grammar schools, and comprehensive colleges, and 13 tertiary institutions.

Educational Legislation

Education is compulsory for all children aged 6-16. These 10 years are defined as primary education in the Icelandic school system, and schooling is free of charge. After that, students can enter secondary schools, and by the age of 20 they graduate to enter university after passing the so-called student examination. Almost no private schools exist at the compulsory level and few at the secondary level.

In 1995, the Education Act of 1974 was revised. The main change was the complete transfer of the primary schools to the local governments as of 1996. The state provides grants to the local governments to finance primary education according to a formula budget, but the management of schools is entirely in the hands of the local governments. Furthermore, small communities can apply for supplementary grants.

Considerable concern was voiced by the teachers that these developments would lead to greater discrepancies between schools and that the small schools would suffer. It has not been long enough to evaluate the consequences entirely, but so far there is no indication that the local governments neglect their schools. The main trends that have been seen so far are that the smallest communities are discussing cooperation, and the local governments can now offer better salaries and fringe benefits to attract good teachers to their schools.

Comprehensive legislation for secondary schools was passed through parliament in 1988 and revised in 1996 that streamlines secondary education and prevents students from being trapped in dead-end educational tracks. Prior to that, most secondary schools had their own legislation. Secondary education continues to be financed by the state budget.

School Library Legislation

Since 1974, school libraries have been compulsory in all primary schools, where they were defined as "one of the main teaching tools for the primary level." The School Library Act was only a framework, and guidelines were to be developed to specify size of housing and collections, services, and the role of librarians in schools. These guidelines were never issued, mainly because of differences of opinion over what the working conditions should be, that is, whether the staff should be appointed as teachers and all library work defined as teaching, or whether the work in the library should be counted on an hourly basis. It has, therefore, been left to the principals to develop school libraries as well as they can, to allocate funds to build up collections, and to allocate hours to library work.

From 1988, the secondary schools have been required to have a library. Most of the grammar schools had considerable library collections by then, but the smaller trade schools were lacking in library facilities. Guidelines to accompany this Act were issued where the school libraries are defined as "information centers for teachers and students." It is also stipulated that the secondary school libraries should be operated by librarians with a university degree in library and information science.

School Libraries: Function and Use

Primary Schools

In 1989-1990, a national survey was carried out and the results reported in the literature (Hannesdottir, 1991b, 1991c, 1992). The survey showed that in

some areas of the country, in particular the western fjords and the east, school libraries were in fewer than half of the schools. These two areas are also the least populated and have many very small schools. In some cases, the schools used the local public library, often housed in the school building; in other cases, they had a small collection located in a classroom, without defining it as a school library.

In 1996, 93.5% of the primary school principals reported in a telephone survey that they had a school library in their school, including the smallest schools. This shows a considerable improvement from the former survey. However, no official definition exists of what is a *school library*, and in both surveys the definition was left to the principals themselves.

In January 1997, a random sample of 800 schoolchildren (ages 10-16) was asked about their school library use. Of the 10-year-old children, 95.8% said they used the school library, 64.3% of them once a week or more. A special effort is made to introduce 9-year-old children to the basics of information skills, and most of the children in the survey mentioned library skills projects that they had done in the school library. Of the 12-year-old children, 51.4% said they used the library once a week or more, but 18.4% did not use school libraries. Of the 14-year-olds, 24.3% said they did not use school libraries at all, and 17.8% were nonusers among the 16-year-olds. In all age groups, girls used the school libraries more than boys.

The students were also asked what they used the school library for. The most common use was reported as borrowing books and use of the library as a study area. After the initial effort to teach the 9-year-olds to use the library, the students seem to use the school library mostly to borrow material.

Secondary Schools

A survey was done of secondary schools in 1996 (Thorarinsdottir, 1997). Among the findings were that only six secondary schools in the country reported having no library service. All the secondary schools in the capital region and 69% of secondary schools outside Reykjavik had professional librarians, on the average about one staff member for each 300 students. In terms of collections, about 70% of the schools had more than 5,000 volumes and around 85% of the libraries provided access to CD-ROMs. The Internet was accessible to 60% of students outside Reykjavik and to 40% of students in the capital region. The services of the libraries included circulation, reading room facilities, and inter library loan, as well as general information services in connection with assignments and library skills instruction. It should be emphasized here that these schools serve students up to the age of 20 and so would be defined as colleges in many other countries.

Automation

One of the most radical changes that has occurred in the Icelandic educational system since 1988 is to do with the advent of information technology.

The state of the art in this area in Icelandic primary schools has recently been reported (Clyde, 1997).

Icelandic educational network, *Ismennt*, was introduced as an experiment in 1988-1989 by the principal in one of the smallest schools in the country. It caught on rapidly and now links together all educational institutions in the country. It is now supported by the Ministry of Education and is administered and developed by the Icelandic Teachers' College.

On the other hand, only about 40% of the primary school libraries had been automated in 1996 and fewer than 20% of the school libraries had access to the Internet, although all the schools were connected. The school libraries had not been automated, although a computer lab was often located just outside the library's doors. This lack of development seems to have two main explanations. To some extent, it can be explained by shortage of trained librarians in schools, where the person in charge of the library has not had sufficient knowledge or interest to influence the automation priorities in the school. Another factor has been that the educational authorities have been waiting for a common solution, a system that they could all adopt. These are more likely explanations rather than any kind of resistance in the schools or shortage of money. Much action in this area is now expected.

As mentioned above, the secondary school libraries are more advanced. All the secondary school libraries in the Reykjavik area have automated their libraries, as have most of the libraries outside the capital region. The secondary school librarians also have their own listserv and their own cooperative committee that helps to advance and coordinate the developments.

New Education Policy, 1998

The present government issued a national information policy in 1996, whereby all libraries were to assume a major role in leading the nation to the new information society, including the school libraries at primary and secondary levels. In 1998, a new national educational policy and a new national curriculum were issued for both primary and secondary schools. The most important changes advocated in this new educational policy are additional foreign-language instruction and instruction in information literacy. By the time youngsters have finished compulsory education at the age of 16, they are supposed to have mastered computer and information literacy skills and to be able to communicate in three foreign languages besides Icelandic.

The Future

In view of these recent policy documents, the future of school libraries in Iceland looks bright. One of the major issues, however, that must be addressed immediately if the implementation of this policy is to be possible is the development of a stronger educational program for school library staff. Such a program must also be offered through distance education. Most primary schools have nobody on the staff with knowledge of how to in-

tegrate information literacy into the curriculum. It can also be expected, given the size of Icelandic schools, that teachers will continue to operate the school library as an extra responsibility along with their general teaching without any training in school library management.

Another issue that needs to be addressed is to increase the information available in the Icelandic language. Instruction on all levels of schooling is done in Icelandic. Textbooks for primary schools are distributed free, and the same textbooks are used in all primary schools. Most reading material for secondary schools is also in Icelandic, but at the university level little is in Icelandic, particularly in the sciences. The students at the tertiary level are expected to use material in English and in at least one of the Scandinavian languages.

Icelandic people fondly refer to themselves as a "nation of books." The nation of books has accepted information technology and the Internet with open arms. We hope the two means of communication will support each other, where young people of the future can access material in their native tongue on the Internet to supplement Icelandic material in printed form.

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