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# School libraries, political information and information literacy provision: findings from a Scottish study

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## Abstract

This paper presents the findings of research which explored Scottish school libraries' information provision and information literacy (IL) support in the run-up to two major political events: the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum (SIR) and the 2015 General UK Parliamentary Election (GE). To do this, the project identified, through an online survey, what political information seeking secondary school students engaged in through school libraries, what information provision and IL support was available to students relating to political issues and events, and what barriers school libraries faced in providing these aspects of political education. It also identified what information seeking students engaged in, what levels of information provision and IL support relating to politics are provided by school libraries, and set out to explore the perceptions and experiences of library staff relating to work in this area. Analysis of the results indicates that there are mixed levels of provision across school libraries in Scotland and that this variation may be influenced by inconsistent policies from local councils and individual schools themselves, as well as variations in the experience and views of library staff. Key activities to support young people's political education are identified, and several reasons library staff do not engage in political work are discussed. The findings are linked to previous research, with a discussion of the need to encourage and support school library staff to contribute to the political education of students alongside teaching staff. Several recommendations for schools and library staff are made, relating to a consideration of the role of school libraries, how they can provide relevant political information, the importance of clear policies around political information provision and the support required for school library workers.

## Keywords

access to information, citizenship, democracy, General Election, human rights, political education, political information, political participation, school librarians, school libraries, Scotland, Scottish Independence Referendum, students, UK, young people.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper presents the findings of research which explored the role school libraries in Scotland played in supporting students' development of political knowledge and understanding. The project sought to identify the role libraries played in supporting young people's political participation in two major political events – the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum (SIR) and the 2015 UK General Election (GE). The project also explored the information and information literacy (IL) needs of young people relating to political participation. The findings of the survey responses highlight students' political information seeking, and the ways in which school libraries can play a role in helping young people to develop their political understanding, but which are limited by several issues.

The turnout for the SIR in 2014 was 85% (Electoral Commission 2014), and among the most engaged and interested citizens were young people (Eichhorn et al. 2014). For example, a survey of 14-17 year olds found that 89% of young people consulted key sources for information on the

referendum, including social media, television, radio, newspapers and publicity material (Eichhorn et al. 2014). The most popular sources of information among young people were social media, television and radio (Eichhorn et al. 2014). Young people's involvement in the SIR was particularly significant because it was the first time that 16 and 17 year olds were able to vote in a referendum or election, a right which was not given to this age group in the subsequent UK election.

The political literacy of young people and their ability to engage in political debate was identified as a key aspect of education around the SIR, and the Electoral Commission produced guidance for anyone with a responsibility for - or interest in - young people's education to support political literacy (Electoral Commission 2013). This posed challenges, including how to ensure that information provided on how to register and vote was clear, accurate and neutral (Electoral Commission 2014) as well as supporting young people to develop knowledge, understanding and opinions about political issues in an appropriate way. Many teachers, youth workers and youth organisations across Scotland worked to support young people to develop their political literacy and participate (Electoral Commission 2014, p. 44), and a wealth of information was available. However, there was some concern that people would struggle with the volume of information and with ascertaining which information was accurate and reliable (Cairney 2014).

These concerns around the political literacy of young people in Scotland have particular relevance for library and information studies (LIS). The extent to which school libraries in Scotland are able to support young people's political literacy is understudied and unclear. This research gap represents one of many gaps in knowledge relating to the role and impact of school libraries. Recent studies have identified a lack of research into school library provision and the impact of school libraries in Scotland (Williams et al. 2013). Research in this area is of particular relevance in the face of significant proposed cuts to school library budgets in Scotland and cuts to education more widely across the UK, for use in evidence-based policy-making.

The study identifies the extent to which school libraries in Scotland provided political information and IL support that may support political education in the run up to the SIR and GE, as an indication of the extent to which school libraries across the UK are currently engaging with work to support political education in terms of political participation, citizenship and political literacy.

## 1.1 The democratic role of librarianship

The importance of political literacy and political participation for the health of democratic society is well-documented (Norris 2002, p. 22). The role of political information and knowledge in enabling people to make informed political decisions is also widely acknowledged (Moy and Gastil 2006). Furthermore, the effects of political socialisation through access to information, information use, and discussion about political issues, have been found to have an impact on not only children's capacities to engage in political life, but has also been found to improve parents' engagement with political information and their development of political knowledge and formation of political opinions (McDevitt and Chaffee 2002). The central role of information and information use for the development of an informed and knowledgeable citizenry connects closely to the aims and values of librarianship. The role of libraries in supporting democracy and political participation is an area of librarianship which many authors have discussed, often citing major works such as Ranganathan's *Five Laws of Library Science* (1931) and Gorman's *Enduring Values* (2000). Much has been written about the democratic potential of public libraries, presenting information provision, education and public space among the ways in which libraries contribute to democratic ideals (Buschman 2007). Similarly, some consideration has been given to the role of IL in academic libraries as serving both academic and civic roles (Kapitzke 2003; Thornton 2012). Considerable emphasis is placed on the ways in which libraries can actively engage people with democratic participation through helping them to become independent learners with strong IL skills, which will enable them to find the information they need in order to successfully participate in political life (Jacobs and Berg 2011). The role of IL instruction in supporting informed citizens for non-academic or everyday life purposes has also been discussed (Correia 2002; Eastman and McGrath 2006; Grose 2011; Johnston and Webber 2005; Jones 2007). School libraries have been identified as

sites of IL provision internationally (Abdullah 2008; Ash-Argyle and Snunith 2014; Streatfield et al. 2011). However, the role and impact of school libraries in supporting citizenship and political knowledge has been the subject of extremely limited research (Smith 2013).

Additionally, there is limited empirical research to identify the extent to which libraries provide information and IL support in relation to political issues and events. Abilock (2006) applies six approaches to civic education to the school library context, suggesting potential ways in which US schools can support civic education. Okiy (2005) considers potential strategies for school libraries to support women's political participation in Nigeria. Williams et al (2013) and Todd (2012) explore the valuable role of school libraries and librarians in the intellectual development of learners and identify a correlation between several factors of school library provision and intellectual capacity in students. These include: the number of library staff; the presence of full time, qualified librarians; the frequency of library instruction activities; collaboration between teachers and librarians; the size and quality of library collections; subscriptions to databases; flexibility in scheduling; and school library spending (Todd 2012; Williams et al 2013).

The absence of substantive literature focusing on school library provision, including around political information provision, represents a significant gap to be addressed, particularly as research has indicated that only a minority (32%) of Scottish 14 -17 year olds felt informed enough to make a decision about the SIR (Eichhorn et al 2014). To contribute to this area, this study focuses on the role of Scottish school libraries in providing information and IL support in the run up to the SIR and GE, and explores the extent to which school libraries support young people to become politically informed. To do this, it is important to first identify where school library provision fits in the overall political education of Scottish students, which is discussed in the following section.

## 1.2 Citizenship education in Scotland

One way of supporting political participation in democratic society is through citizenship and political education (Benton et al., 2008; Keating et al., 2010; Sunshine Hillygus 2005). Recommendations around this form of education make reference to the importance of young people's ability to become independently knowledgeable about political issues to be able to make informed decisions. There is a paucity of empirical studies identifying the impact of citizenship and political education on children's political participation, and the studies that have been conducted focus on quantitative outcomes relating to limited forms of political participation (Manning and Edwards 2013). Nevertheless, systematic reviews of quantitative evidence around the impact of citizenship education do indicate positive effects on children's political expression (Manning and Edwards 2013).

In Scotland, the Curriculum for Excellence embeds citizenship education into the eight curriculum areas (Expressive arts, Health and wellbeing, Languages, Mathematics, Religious and moral education, Sciences, Social studies, Technologies):

*Global citizenship brings together education for citizenship, international education and sustainable development education and recognises the common outcomes and principles of these three areas. All curriculum areas can contribute to developing the skills, attributes and knowledge that will create active global citizens. (Education Scotland, 2013)*

Within the Global Citizenship theme, there is a specific focus on education for citizenship which addresses the "exercising of rights and responsibilities within communities at local, national and global levels". This includes "the development of informed decision making, and the ability to take thoughtful and responsible action, locally and globally." (Education Scotland, 2013)

The provision of citizenship education manifests in various ways across the curriculum depending on teachers' delivery of the Curriculum for Excellence, but the specific subject in the curriculum that focuses most closely on citizenship in terms of political participation is Modern Studies. Every

student studies Modern Studies from first to third year of their secondary education (age 11 to 14). Issues covered include representation, equality, need, rights and responsibilities, participation and power. The key skills Modern Studies seeks to focus on are decision making, detecting bias, application of knowledge, interpreting statistics, and supporting opinion, all of which feed into the overarching area of political literacy. Political literacy is defined as “the skills by which citizens make informed choices about society they wish to inhabit”, “the skills are such that people understand political decision making process and as such have ramifications for their own lives”, and a “set of attributes and higher-order thinking skills that enables evidence and reasoned thought to engage in political debate.” (Education Scotland 2013) These capacities have a considerable overlap with the vision of school libraries and IL as key to students’ personal, social and cultural growth described by UNESCO (1999).

### **1.3 Secondary schools and secondary school libraries in Scotland**

The educational context in Scotland is relatively complex; there are 364 state-funded secondary schools (Scottish Government 2016) and approximately 70 independent schools that provide some or all levels of secondary education (Scottish Council of Independent Schools 2016). There are 251 members of school library staff (in qualified and unqualified roles) working in state-funded secondary schools (Scottish Government 2015). In Scottish schools, library staff are employed directly by the local authority rather than through schools (which are also run by the local authorities). School libraries are currently undergoing restructuring across the country, and although each secondary school has a library or information space, not all of these are staffed. Data is not available regarding how many libraries there are and how many staff work in each of these libraries. Some staff work across two or more schools and the libraries are open on different days of the week. Data is not publicly available regarding school library provision in independent schools.

There are no Scotland-specific professional guidelines for school libraries, but a self-evaluation document was produced by the Scottish school library community to be undertaken as part of school inspections (HM Inspectorate of Education, 2005). Within these guidelines, supporting citizenship is identified as a way school libraries benefit their communities and support the Scottish Government’s educational aims (Ibid). For a comprehensive description of school library structures in Scotland, Sacco Judge (2012) is recommended.

## **2 Methods**

The study sought to answer four questions:

1. What information seeking did students engage in during the run up to the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum (SIR) and the 2015 General Election (GE)?
2. What resources (information and IL support) did school libraries provide in the run up to the SIR and GE?
3. What perceptions do school librarians have about engagement with political information provision?
4. What barriers did school librarians face when providing information and IL support relating to the SIR and GE?

Due to the small scale of the study, the research focuses on data gathered from library staff. The study sought to gain an insight into what library resources are provided and what IL activities take place, and library staff are the individuals with the most insight into this. The study also sought to identify the extent to which library staff feel these resources and activities are sufficient.

### **2.1 Survey**

The survey method was chosen as a scalable and cost-effective way of reaching the maximum number of geographically disparate school library workers across Scotland. Additionally, a

significant benefit of self-completion questionnaires is that they are quick to administer (Bryman 2012, p.233). Given the limited scale of the study, it was important to collect data quickly to maximize the time available for analysis.

The survey was produced in Qualtrics, an online survey tool, and was distributed online, via JISC Mail mailing lists, Twitter, Facebook, emails direct to staff members and via library service managers. The Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) provided a list of email addresses for school library staff across the country. Individuals working in any secondary school library anywhere in Scotland were welcome to participate.

The survey aimed to gain an insight into the information and IL provision of secondary school libraries and library workers in Scotland. Questions focused on what kinds of information about politics is available to school students through school libraries, what involvement libraries and library workers have with the citizenship and political education that takes place in schools more widely, and what kind of support students asked for from library workers during the GE and SIR. The questionnaire is presented in Appendix A. Participants were informed that they could stop taking part at any point and that they could request for their responses to be excluded from the study at any point.

The survey received 174 responses in total, with 83 completed questionnaires. Three of the respondents of the completed questionnaires identified themselves as working in independent schools. Four respondents identified their geographical area but not their school. As an estimate, including incomplete or unfilled responses, the response rate represents almost 70% of state-funded secondary school library staff in Scotland. However, it was not possible to identify which of the incomplete and complete responses were by the same individuals. As an estimate, the completed responses represent approximately a third of Scottish state-funded secondary school library staff (Scottish Government 2016). Data is not available regarding the number of school library staff in independent schools to calculate a response rate.

The geographic spread of respondents was roughly representative of the distribution of the Scottish population, with 11% working in Edinburgh and 8% in Aberdeenshire. Glasgow may also be under-represented (5%); although no formal figures are available, there are 31 secondary schools in Glasgow which are served by one librarian across every two schools. These figures indicate an approximate 30% response rate in Glasgow. The respondents to the survey represent a broad range of Scottish regions, although there were no participants from Dumfries and Galloway, East Lothian, Midlothian or Renfrewshire. Although the questionnaire was distributed using a range of methods (including direct emails, mailing lists, social media and word of mouth), particular support was provided by library managers in Edinburgh and Aberdeenshire so it is possible this method of questionnaire distribution was the most effective and influenced the response rate positively in these areas.

A wide range of role titles were provided, at different levels within organisational hierarchies. The range of levels of roles held by respondents provides a good cross-section of the population of school library workers in Scotland. The most frequently reported job titles provided were librarian (n=37), with library resource centre coordinator (n=11), network librarian (n=11) and school librarian (n=11) also relatively frequent. Fewer non-professional posts were reported; for example senior LRC assistant (n=1) and library assistant (n=1). This may have been due to the circulation of the questionnaire on professional email lists and directly to named librarians, although library service managers (i.e. individuals employed in managerial roles by local authorities to oversee the work of staff working in school libraries) were asked to encourage all members of staff working in school libraries to complete the survey. For the purpose of presenting the findings of this study, the term "library workers" refers to all paid individuals working in libraries and represents an appreciation of the labour and perspectives regardless of qualified/unqualified status.

### 3 Findings

The findings from the survey were categorised into three key areas: students' political information seeking, information provision and IL instruction.

#### 3.1 Students' political information seeking

Two questions in the survey addressed the kinds of information students sought in the run up to specific political events - the GE and the SIR.

##### 3.1.1 Referendum information seeking

The majority of participants reported that students had sought information from them in the run-up to the SIR (68%). The format of information sought included newspapers, books about Scottish Independence, manifestos, relevant websites and white papers. Additionally, participants reported that students asked general questions, for example about why the Referendum was happening, how to register to vote and to check their own eligibility to vote. They also wanted to know about what would happen in the event of a Yes vote on Independence. They looked for information about potential changes to higher education. One respondent reported some young people asked for information about concepts such as socialism, fascism and communism, which students said they had come across in discussions or online reading.

Participants reported that students had asked about their personal perspectives especially during the campaign. Young people asked library workers if they had heard about a particular news item, or how they reacted to an event in the news. Students were reported as being curious as to how the adults around them were going to vote. Young people wanted to hear the arguments people would give to explain their own position. A number of students sought help with arguments for Yes and No votes, thoughts on the importance of voting, and other discussions with members of staff. One participant reported that the display they had produced for the SIR was a discussion prompt for some students and provided the opportunity for the library staff to support students' political understanding.

##### 3.1.2 General Election information seeking

In contrast to the relatively high proportion of respondents (68%) who said that students sought information about the SIR, students were reported as seeking less information about the GE. 32% of participants reported that students sought information about the GE from the school library, whereas 68% reported that students did *not* seek information about the GE from the library or its staff. Some respondents suggested that students were less interested in the GE than they had been in the Referendum, and that they did not feel as much of a part of it because they could not vote. Where students did seek information about the GE, they sought books and online information about the main political parties, who their constituency representatives were, the history of the electoral process, manifestos from the main parties and political issues in general.

#### 3.2 Political information resources

##### 3.2.1 School library provision

The previous section identified the various kinds of information sought about the SIR and the GE. The availability of information resources to meet the reported information needs varied across formats of information. Survey respondents reported being asked which of a list of resources were available for students in their schools, the majority of survey respondents responded that computers and the internet (97%), books about social and political issues (95%) books about the political system (89%), and newspapers and magazines (70%) are available in the schools. Slightly fewer than half of respondents indicated an awareness that citizenship lessons are provided by schools (49%), and just over a quarter of respondents reported that politics lessons are available

for students (32%). 28% of survey respondents reported that displays about politics are present in their schools. 17% reported that other resources are provided. Of the “other” (17%) resources available, respondents reported resources such as news cuttings files, topical displays (about issues other than what they considered to be ‘politics’), local government information leaflets, author and speaker visits, reading and writing competitions, displays of student work, and prison visits as resources about the political system and politics.

**Table 1: Which of the resources below are available for students in your school?**

Answer	Response	%
Computers with internet access	93	97%
Books about social and political issues	91	95%
Books about the political system	85	89%
Newspapers and magazines	67	70%
Citizenship lessons	47	49%
Politics lessons	32	33%
Displays about politics	27	28%
Other (please specify)	16	17%

Fiction books were also identified as relevant by three survey respondents. Some survey respondents reported that their schools subscribe to resources which specifically focus on politics or current awareness, or which contain relevant content, including databases and online sources, subscriptions to The Day news search engine, and subscriptions to *Issues* and *Issues Today* (Independence Educational Publishers, 2016) which were described as providing “easily accessible information for lower years on social and political issues”.

### 3.2.2 Satisfaction with level of political information provision

The degree to which respondents felt there were enough of these resources available in their schools varied. The table below indicates the average ranking respondents gave on a sliding scale where 0 represented not enough and 100 represented enough:

**Table 2: To what extent do you think your library has enough resources about the political system and politics more generally?**

Resource type	Av. Value	Std. Dev.	Responses
Computers with internet access	77.80	24.09	94
Books about social and political issues	60.19	24.94	90
Citizenship education	51.07	28.86	89
Politics education	44.12	26.81	83
Books about politics	43.40	25.87	73
Newspapers and magazines	37.47	30.03	66
Displays about politics	34.71	32.19	58

The responses to this question indicate that internet access and citizenship education are the political literacy resources most viewed as present at a sufficient level within schools, whereas the level of information present through politics displays, newspapers and magazines, and books about politics are most viewed as being less than sufficient within schools. Some of the suggested reasons given for the lack of information in these formats are discussed later in the paper.



The average values of the responses indicate that the respondents tended to think that their libraries provide what could be considered “good” levels of computers with internet access and books about social and political issues. An “average” level (where average would be reported as 50 on the 0-100 scale) of citizenship education was reported, and a below “average” level of politics education, books about politics, newspapers and magazines, and displays about politics were reported.

The standard deviation of the responses indicates that respondents across Scotland rated similar levels of satisfaction about the level of provision of different resources about the political system and politics; that is, there was relatively little variation in the levels of satisfaction expressed about provision of resources. Overall, the results indicate that respondents were satisfied with computer and internet provision, books about social and political issues, and citizenship education and less satisfied with the availability of politics education, books about politics, newspapers and magazines, and displays about politics.

Where participants reported dissatisfaction with their political information provision in school libraries, several identified severely reduced and extremely limited budgets as the reason for not stocking more resources. One participant reported that their school allocates less than £1 per pupil to the annual library budget. Another reported that they frequently supplement library collections with items they personally purchase, such as daily newspapers.

### **3.3 Teaching and IL instruction relating to politics**

#### **3.3.1 School education about political participation**

In response to being asked about what provision is made in schools for teaching students about how they can participate in politics, 48 participants answered, with differing suggestions and examples. Most respondents to this question identified Social subjects and their departments as being responsible for this area of education. More specifically, specific curriculum subjects and areas of the Curriculum for Excellence were identified: Modern Studies (at National 4, 5 and Higher Levels); Citizenship; Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE); Social and Media Studies; and Politics. None of these subjects are compulsory throughout secondary education in Scotland. Several respondents indicated that they either were not aware of political education or did not believe a significant amount of political education took place in their school. The variation in responses indicated differing levels of participant awareness of political education and other activities that may take place in schools to teach students about political participation.

#### **3.3.2 Extra-curricular political education**

Some survey respondents also identified extra-curricular activities as playing a part in the political education of students, through mock elections, debating clubs and competitions, political debates, Model UN, Amnesty Group, student council, hustings for Parliamentary candidates, and MSP visits. One respondent described how a Home School Partnership Officer talks to the students about becoming involved in the Scottish Youth Parliament Elections.

Some respondents provided information about specific events and activities that were held around the times of the SIR and GE, including mock elections, debates, visiting speakers, school trips and events. Only one respondent at this point identified the library as an aspect of the provision made in their school for teaching students about how they can participate in politics. This may be reflective of an overall conception that the library is not a core provider of this kind of education, but 59% of survey respondents indicated that they were involved to some extent in providing the activities around political engagement, which suggests that although they do not necessarily serve a direct teaching role, school library staff do support teaching staff in education relating to political participation.

Some of the respondents who answered that they are involved in supporting these activities gave further information about their involvement. The majority of respondents identified information

provision and displays as the ways they support the school to teach students about how to participate in politics. Some respondents identified library staff involvement and management of clubs and activities, such as coordinating the Gender Equality Club and the Amnesty group, as a way they support teaching about political participation. These are roles which may mean students conceive of library staff as explicitly politically engaged, which could in turn influence how they are viewed as sources of political information. This was reflected in some respondents' identification of the way students feel they can ask them questions about politics.

### **3.3.3 IL provision in schools**

The majority of survey respondents (85%) reported that they do have some involvement in IL provision in schools, either within or outwith the library space. Seven of the 96 respondents to this question provided further information. The comments included information about working with teachers and other groups and links to HE. The involvement reported included joint leadership of a creative writing group, IL sessions delivered in the library and embedded in literacy classes, provision of a research and information skills course, trips to a university library for information skills training, ad hoc workshops, and library inductions.

In terms of political elements of IL provision in schools, in contrast to the high proportion of participants who reported that they engage in IL instruction, a small proportion of these individuals responded positively when asked if their respondents' work in IL ever involves talking about politics or political issues with students. Of the 78 respondents who reported that they are involved in providing IL support, 14 of them (18%) reported that this IL support has a political element.

However, where participants reported that they do include elements of politics and political issues, several examples were provided. The examples given included discussions around apartheid, comparisons between education systems in the UK and China, political literacy, political topics in discursive essays, encouraging students to study topics they feel passionately about, and using examples of news sources to encourage considerations of bias.

### **3.4 Opinions about political elements of IL**

Survey responses indicated mixed opinions about whether IL should have a political dimension. 64% of respondents said they thought IL should involve talking about politics or political issues with students, whereas 34% said they did not.

Benefits of and reasons for engaging in politics and political issues through IL included raising political awareness, helping students to develop the capacity to understand political events, using political material as an example of issues of bias and reliability, and connecting school work to home life. From the respondents who said they do include elements of political education in their IL provision, some suggestions about relevant areas of the topic identified included Internet censorship, evaluating websites, corporate or political manipulation in web searches, and bias and different information sources.

The reasons given for not engaging in the political dimensions of IL included the perceived neutrality of the library, the complexity of the issues, a lack of time and resources, not feeling confident or knowledgeable enough; not feeling it is appropriate, not feeling it is a priority, and not feeling it is relevant to the work of the library.

Of the 19 survey respondents who said that IL should not engage in politics or political issues, 8 gave reasons why. One respondent reported that they were "Not convinced there is a need under Info Literacy". Another stated "In the context of information literacy I don't think it is appropriate to involve politics of any kind." Other respondent responded no but then described how IL could or should engage in political issues but that they thought IL was a broad area. The complexity and challenges of engaging in this area of work were identified by one respondent. Two respondents suggested that the political dimensions of IL are not a priority, and that the transferable nature of IL

skills means individuals should have the capacity to apply IL to political issues themselves without support from libraries. These responses indicate a variety of reasons for not viewing political education as an appropriate area for IL, which appears to include conceptions of the definition of IL.

### 3.5 Disincentives and barriers to political information and IL provision

Some disincentives and barriers to political information provision and the inclusion of political elements into IL work related to the personal perspectives of respondents. Where respondents reported that they did not feel their school library provided enough political information, or where they felt their IL provision engaged enough with political issues and education, a number of challenges were identified in terms of practice and policy from schools and local authorities.

**Table 3: Barriers to engagement in political information and IL provision**

Barrier category	Examples of barriers
<b>Personal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not feeling confident or knowledgeable enough</li> <li>• Personal discomfort with engaging in political discussion</li> <li>• Not viewing political information as relevant to school library work</li> <li>• Not feeling political participation is a priority for schools</li> <li>• Viewing teaching as the role of the teacher not the librarian</li> </ul>
<b>Practice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of culture of library engagement in school</li> <li>• Lack of time and resources</li> <li>• Not feeling it is appropriate</li> <li>• Risk aversion of schools</li> <li>• Lack of age-appropriate resources about democracy and political issues and participation to stock in the library</li> <li>• Moderation of political information provision by colleagues</li> </ul>
<b>Policy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived role of the library as being neutral</li> <li>• Council policies around politics and information provision</li> <li>• Lack of clear guidance about what information provision and support is appropriate</li> <li>• Culture of fear of engagement in schools</li> </ul>

To explore these barriers in more depth with the participants who had provided detail and expressed willingness to take part in further data collection, follow-up interviews were conducted. Findings of these interviews will be explored in a later paper.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Students' political information seeking

This study provides an insight into the political information seeking of students through school libraries, the extent of political information provision and political IL provision in school libraries in Scotland. One interesting finding is how library workers report students asking them questions about their own political perspectives. The political information seeking echoes the findings around the political information needs of young people in other studies (Smith and McMenemy, 2016; Levinsen and Yndigegn, 2015; Diehm and Lupton, 2012), as well as the identification of people as one of the most heavily used information sources, and as a more heavily used source than artefact-based information sources (Case 2002). This may indicate that school library staff are seen as being more accessible sources of information than the other resources in the library, which would align with Shenton's (2004) findings. However, this study did not collect data about the ages of the students seeking political information, which may vary across age ranges in a similar way to information seeking in an academic context (Madden et al. 2007). Further studies may wish to

explore this aspect of children's political information seeking with a view to making recommendations about information provision for specific age groups.

The role of school library workers as people students go to with questions about political issues raises interesting questions about how library workers can appropriately respond to these questions within the limitations placed upon them by schools and local authorities. These limitations and regulations have been identified as a barrier to political education around the SIR and the decisions made by local authorities to bar political discussion in schools were the subject of debate and challenge during the referendum period (Cowan 2014; Dornan and Regan 2014; Ellison 2014; Kemp 2014).

In terms of the political information resources available in school libraries, no previous studies have been identified which explore this issue. There is also a lack of empirical research on the degree of political education in UK schools. However, there is some degree of dissatisfaction with political education across the UK (Carter 2016). Although some participants in this study reported that they perceive there are good levels of political information provision in their schools, it is unknown if students feel the same way. Some research indicates that political education in Scotland and across the UK may not meet the needs of young people (Mackie, 2016). Given the potentially positive impact of perceived levels of citizenship education on citizenship activities (Keating et al. 2010) it is important to investigate further the role of political information provision in libraries and its impact on the political behavior of young people.

#### **4.2 Political elements of IL and library work**

The responses to whether IL should include political elements include some suggestions that this is not an appropriate area of engagement. The responses indicate a variety of reasons for not viewing political education as an appropriate area for information literacy, which appears to include conceptions of the definition of information literacy. Previous studies have identified a wide range of conceptions of IL on the part of librarians (Limberg and Sundin 2006; Mckinney and Wheeler 2015; Webber and Johnston 2003), and this bears consideration in relation to the development of guidelines for school libraries.

Although the majority of participants reported that they engage in IL instruction, a small proportion of these individuals responded positively when asked if their respondents' work in IL ever involves talking about politics or political issues with students. Although this indicates a relatively low level of engagement with political IL provision in Scotland, where examples are provided they indicate a promising and imaginative engagement with the curriculum and wider school environment. This connection with curriculum subjects and overarching themes in the Curriculum for Excellence links strongly with Tuominen et al.'s (2005) conception of IL as a sociotechnical practice, in which they posit that "information skills cannot be taught independently of the knowledge domains, organizations, and practical tasks in which these skills are used" (p. 329). Teaching IL and political aspects of it within an embedded position within subject lessons may be a way for students to contextualise IL capacities in a meaningful way, as advocated by authors such as Hepworth and Walton (2009). A particularly relevant area of LIS that focuses on teaching political aspects of information use, as well as advocating for the engagement of learners with politics as part of the learning process for academic and non-academic purposes is critical IL (Doherty and Ketchner 2005; Jacobs and Berg 2011; Tewell 2015; Whitworth 2014).

The role of libraries in supporting political education in schools is an underexplored area with a paucity of empirical studies and theoretical consideration. However, Abilock (2006) applies six approaches to civic education to the school library context, suggesting potential ways in which US schools can support civic education through classroom instruction, discussion of current issues, service learning, extra-curricular activities, student voice and simulation of civic structures and processes. Some of these activities were identified in this study.

#### **4.4 Librarians as political information gatekeepers**

There is a lack of guidance and decisions are made by individual library workers based on their own understandings and perspectives. While autonomy is important, the lack of guidance and support in the form of policies from professional bodies may make it difficult for librarians to insist on providing political information and assert the responsibility of libraries to do so. This issue is identified by McNicol (2016, p. 338) who discusses library resource decisions in the context of intellectual freedom. She raises the issue that the role of librarian as arbiter and gatekeeper of information is important given their expertise, but a reliance on personal judgement leaves librarians “worryingly open to challenges from groups or individuals wishing to impose their views on the running of the library.” Oppenheim and Smith (2004) recommend the use of collection management policies to guard against censorship in libraries. Although censorship may seem a strong word to use in the context of school librarians choosing whether to stock certain newspapers or leaflets about political events, Jones (1999) argues that libraries deciding to not stock resources despite them satisfying the collection development policy criteria can also be considered censorship. In the context of Scottish school libraries, this may be a moot point given the extremely limited resource budgets that were given as the reason in this study for not stocking newspapers, magazines, books about politics and other resources.

#### **4.5 Library neutrality**

One key issue emerging from the data centres around school policies and requirements for school libraries to be neutral on political issues, and perspectives of library workers that it is the role of schools, libraries, teachers and librarians to be neutral. This is the topic of an increasing amount of debate within education and librarianship, with some authors suggesting that library and information services should always strive to be politically neutral, others problematising the difference between neutrality and impartiality (Lewis 2008) and others arguing that it is neither practicable or desirable for libraries or any education providers to be neutral (Bourg 2015; Giroux 1988; Pho et al. 2015). An area of LIS that acknowledges librarianship’s inherent non-neutrality is critical librarianship (Gregory and Higgins 2013; McCook and Phenix 2008). Within this field, critical IL, among other approaches, focuses on how library workers can support learners’ understandings of how their encounters with information are imbued with social and cultural dimensions (Tewell 2016). Tensions around the issue of neutrality were key to the findings of this study and will be the focus of a later paper.

### **5. Conclusions**

A wide range of methods of information provision and IL support relating to politics were identified. Some information was provided specifically to support political literacy development in the run up to the SIR and the GE, whereas IL support and some other forms of information are provided by the libraries at all times of year.

School libraries supported students’ political knowledge and participation in a broad range of ways, although there was a variation in provision across the locations of the library workers involved in the study. A more consistent approach to school library provision is recommended.

The participants in this study reported a wide range of information needs of young people in relation to political participation. Questions asked of library staff included why political events were happening, how they could participate, what the outcomes of the events may be, and how the outcomes may affect their own lives. Some young people seek specific information about political parties and ideologies, and resources pitched at an appropriate level for secondary school aged children can be difficult to locate.

The research identified a number of examples of the work being done in school libraries to support political participation. These activities developed through the librarians’ identification of the needs of the students in their schools, but without specific strategic planning and the identification of young people’s needs, it is not always possible to anticipate what support is needed. This study

aimed to identify the needs of Scottish young people in relation to political participation, specifically around the SIR. The insight provided by this study aims to contribute to schools' and librarians' understandings of young people's information needs so that their information provision and IL support can be developed to better meet the needs of their own students.

The library staff who participated in this study identified a number of barriers they have experienced or fear they will experience when they seek to engage in supporting students' political participation. These barriers relate to personal perceptions, school practice and culture, and policy. However, these barriers were not uniformly reported by all respondents. Some libraries *have* been able to lead or take part in a number of activities which explicitly promote the development of political knowledge and participation, with the support of their local authorities and other bodies. This suggests that this kind of activity is within the accepted remit of school libraries, and that where it is presently believed to not be, there is the potential for discussion around the issues in the elements of education that support students' development in relation to citizenship.

## 5.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings from study, several recommendations relating to sharing best practice and overcoming some of the significant barriers are suggested.

First, current political events can stimulate a high level of interest amongst young people, affording an opportunity for school libraries to get involved in political engagement work. This could involve topics such as the electoral system and current affairs. Newspapers and campaign materials provide a potential wealth of examples for IL teaching. The findings of this study indicate that in some schools, this kind of activity is within the accepted remit of school libraries. It would be appropriate for CILIPS and other bodies relating to school libraries to advocate for school libraries' involvement in the elements of education that support students' development in relation to citizenship.

Second, political literacy is an area of learning which features in several aspects of the Curriculum for Excellence, including Global Citizenship. Understanding the different areas of the Curriculum for Excellence, the inclusion of political literacy, and the ways in which the school library has a role to play in supporting various aspects of the curriculum would be of benefit to library staff, teaching staff and students as well as helping to justify the value of school library services to the education system.

Third, it is evident that young people are interested in political events and issues, and view library staff as appropriate people to ask when they have an information need. It would therefore be beneficial for library workers to anticipate that they are likely to be asked for their opinions in political discussions and to consider how they are going to manage these situations. As with any member of school staff, library workers do not need to share their personal views if they are not comfortable doing so, but it is important for staff to know what is appropriate in a particular context as well as to be aware of the school's policies regarding this. It is an opportunity for library staff to support young people's development of political and information literacy. Library staff should apply the same skills to these questions as they do to any other reference enquiry.

Fourth, guidance from professional bodies may go a long way to supporting school library workers to support the political education of students as part of the school environment. Participants in this study identified several areas where support and guidance may help school libraries to improve their provision of information and their engagement with IL:

- Advice about what school library workers can and cannot do to stay within policy boundaries;
- Support with advocating to schools and local authorities for the importance of this work;
- Material to highlight the contribution of school libraries to the Curriculum for Excellence and citizenship agenda;

- Evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of political education involving school libraries;
- Examples of best practice about what other school librarians are doing that could be replicated;
- Signposting to relevant resources to stock and use in school libraries to support political education.

Finally, to be able to successfully engage in work to support political literacy, schools must provide an appropriate level of school library resources, including staffing. Schools should have qualified, full-time librarians with managerial status within schools (Williams et al. 2013). Participants indicated that their schools do not have adequate library resources and staff to meaningfully engage in IL support for the purposes of supporting political education, and within the current context of cuts to school libraries it is likely that many more schools will no longer have an appropriate level of staffing within school libraries to engage in work to provide information and support to students relating to political participation.

In terms of the kinds of resources libraries could provide, the findings of this study indicate that there is demand for print and online resources on political topics that are pitched at a younger (i.e. teenage) audience and that are written for a general audience, not just those studying politics as an academic subject. Library staff could highlight print and online resources that might be useful, as well as raise questions such as bias and stimulate debate and awareness of IL. Additionally, access to online and print newspapers could be improved. Ideally each school would have access to a range of online and print newspapers. A scheme that was administered centrally would overcome some of the problems with setting up subscriptions. Consortium agreements may offer economies of scale. Providing free or low cost access would be of mutual benefit as it would promote newspaper reading among the next generation.

The findings from this study indicate that there is a lack of clarity with regards to how these principles manifest in schools and library services. Standardised guidance from local councils and education services regarding what can and cannot be done around election time and generally may be a way to provide clarity. Explicit guidance on how information provision around different political views and the impartiality of library services is recommended.

One of the core professional values of librarianship is resistance to censorship (Gorman 2000). However, school librarians need to balance freedom of expression with their duty to keep all students safe. Young people need the opportunity to explore different ideas, and they will naturally form and reform their views over time. For example, when holding mock-elections, schools should anticipate having to make difficult decisions about including or excluding far-right parties.

The range of responses from participants relating to what they may and may not do in terms of information provision and engagement with political events, sometimes within the same local authority, indicates a potential need for improved guidance for schools and staff. This is in line with recommendations from the Electoral Commission (2013, p.5), who recommended that local authorities should provide guidance to all their staff relating to conduct in the run up to the SIR. They identify several key principles:

- Council staff must by law act in a politically neutral way at all times.
- There is particular sensitivity around this political neutrality in the run-up to an election or referendum.
- Particular care needs to be taken to ensure that any events, publicity or other communications are politically neutral during a pre-election or pre-referendum period.
- Council facilities and resources must not be used, or appear to be used, in support of a political party, an election candidate or a particular campaign in a referendum.
- Unless otherwise stated, it should be assumed that normal council business will continue.

Although many recommendations for activities are suggested, it is important to acknowledge the current context for school libraries in Scotland before exploring the extent to which they do or do not contribute to areas of education and development; any recommendations for improvement are made with the awareness that these improvements may not be practicable given the current political and economic context.

School libraries are not statutory in Scotland, and are facing severe funding cuts as part of cuts to spending on secondary education. In Scotland, these funding cuts are manifesting in the redundancy of school librarians, splitting one member of staff across a number of school (and sometimes public) libraries, reduction in staffed opening hours and cuts to resource budgets. This makes supporting students' development and delivering the goals of the Curriculum for Excellence more challenging.

CILIP/CILIPS and the School Library Association are well placed to support school library workers with these areas, and the development of a national policy perspective on this issue would be a valuable contribution, to provide clarity and support for those library workers who do wish to engage in aspects of political education through their provision of IL support and resources within the school library.

These recommendations, alongside the examples of political information provision identified in this study, may be a useful addition to school librarians' repertoire of recommended political information they may be able to provide, which is presently limited. Specific recommendations regarding the provision of political information are made in the School Library Association's collection management guidelines, which state that the school library should provide "access to a range of newspapers that reflect political balance, either in hard copy or online" (School Library Association 2015, p.6), but this is the only specific recommendation from a professional association identified in the research around this study.

## 5.2 Further research

This study has only scratched the surface of the work school libraries do to encourage young people to become engaged citizens. A larger scale study into school libraries across the UK would yield more representative results and provide a broader picture of the work taking place and the barriers being encountered. In particular, there is scope for future research to investigate the specific policies and recommended practices libraries are instructed to follow by schools, local authorities and national governments across the UK. A larger research project would seek to study students' experiences of political education in the school environment, including in curricular subjects, encounters with the library and through interactions with staff and other students.

There is also much more to be explored around the barriers school librarians face in relation to engaging with political education; while the survey successfully reached a large proportion of secondary school library staff across Scotland, more in-depth exploration of the issues raised would provide context to the specific challenges identified by school librarians. Findings cannot be considered representative, and further research should seek to gather the perspectives of a broader sample of school librarians, including school librarians in independent schools.

Additionally, the issue of school library funding and resourcing identified in this study could be explored in quantitative depth, with comparisons across local authorities and state/private schools; a comparative study of state-funded and independent schools and their approaches to school library provision in general, as well as in terms of political information provision, would make a valuable contribution to the theory and practice of librarianship. The barriers and issues raised in this study could be used as a starting point for the topics to be explored in further studies. Although a future paper discussing the issues raised around the perceived neutrality of school libraries by participants in this study, the topic merits further study. Future studies looking at political information provision in schools may wish to expand on this work to explore the extent to which students and teaching staff view library activities as adequate to support political education.



Although it is difficult in the domain of education to conduct comparative studies using methods such as randomised controlled trials to identify the most effective interventions, a potentially informative area for further investigation may be to seek to identify which activities taking place through school libraries are the most effective in supporting the development of political knowledge and ability to locate, understand, critique and effectively use political information. This could form the basis of an evidence-based set of recommendations for supporting informed citizenship in schools and elsewhere. This could contribute to the demands being made by political figures for 'proof' that school libraries can and/or do have an impact on student attainment and development. Further research would ideally build on the large international body of quantitative (and qualitative) evidence of the positive impact of school libraries on attainment, literacy and learning, with the inclusion of all areas of the Curriculum for Excellence, including Global Citizenship. There has not yet been a quantitative assessment of the impact of Scottish school libraries (Williams 2015) and research should be conducted to address this.

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## Appendix A: Questionnaire

1. What school do you work in?  
(Free text)
2. What region is your school in?  
(Drop down menu)
3. What is your role title?  
(Free text)
4. How many hours a week is the library open?  
(Free text)
5. How many hours a week is the library staffed with a librarian?  
(Free text)
6. How many hours a week is the library staffed overall?  
(Free text)
7. Do you do information literacy instruction?  
Yes / No / (Free text)
8. Which of the resources below are available for students in the school?  
(Multiple choice)
  - Books about the political system
  - Books about social and political issues
  - Computers with internet access
  - Newspapers and magazines
  - Citizenship lessons
  - Politics lessons
  - Displays about politics
  - Other (free text)
9. To what extent do you think your library has enough resources about the political system and politics more generally?  
(1-100 scale and free text box for comments)
10. What provision is made for teaching students about how they can participate in politics?  
(Free text box)
11. Are you involved in supporting any of these activities? (Please give details)  
Yes  
No  
Other  
(Free text box for comments)
12. Are you involved in supporting Global Citizenship as part of the Curriculum for Excellence?  
(Please give details)  
Yes  
No  
Other  
(Free text box for comments)

13. Do you think the library has a role to play in supporting Global Citizenship? (Please give details)  
Yes  
No  
I don't know  
(Free text box for comments)
14. If you teach information literacy, does your work ever involve talking about politics or political issues with students? (Please give details)  
Yes  
No  
Other  
(Free text box for comments)
15. If not, do you think it should? (Please give details)  
Yes  
No  
Other  
(Free text box for comments)