School Librarian Perceptions of the Importance of Information Literacy

Jenifer R. Spisak
Longwood University, United States

School librarians teach students information literacy to help them navigate, evaluate, and use information. The need for information literacy is increasing as the amount of information and misinformation available on the Internet has increased. In this study, the perceptions of school librarians were sought concerning the topic of information literacy importance. Three current school librarians who are professionally active in the field of school librarianship were interviewed. Data for these interviews were collected and transcribed. Once patterns emerged from these interviews, the story of the importance of information literacy was told through the eyes of school librarians. The results of this study could be used to make policy and practice decisions in school environments to increase information literacy instruction.

Introduction

The omnipresence of information has changed the way people search for new knowledge and conduct research, but it has not negated the need for information literacy. In the past, when people wanted to conduct research, they went to the library to find information. Today, information is readily accessible almost anywhere through a computer or handheld device. Due to today’s students growing up in this reality, they are often called digital natives (Prensky, 2001). Digital natives’ lifelong access to technology, however, has not taught them to navigate and evaluate today’s ubiquitous information. Students still lack information literacy skills such as the ability to find, evaluate, and ethically and effectively use information (Spisak, 2018).

Information literacy is a core tenet of school librarianship (American Association of School Librarians, 2018; International Federation of Library Associations and Institutes, 2015). In the past, the term literacy simply meant the ability to read and write. Now, in the digital age, with information being shared at previously unfathomable rates, the world has a need for more than traditional literacy; it now has a need for transliteracy, or multiple literacies (Tyner, 2009). Instilling multiple literacies, especially information literacy, is more crucial than ever. School librarians have been teaching students information literacy skills for decades, but the importance of these skills has become even greater as the Internet age has advanced. Information literacy is “a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 1989, para. 3).

During the 2016 United States presidential election, use of the term “fake news” increased (“Fake News: Search Term,” 2017). Fake news is often used to describe false or extremely biased stories and the term has become a part of the cultural zeitgeist. School librarians have been able to...
use it as a way to reinforce the need for information literacy instruction. They understand the influence of fake news, the prevailing susceptibility of people to it, and that, because of this, information literacy instruction is important. Susceptibility to fake news is not exclusive to students and has been cited as influencing adult voters; for example, Pew Research Center (Barthel, Mitchell, & Holcomb, 2016) published a study that showed even adults often believed fake news stories, and 23% of adults admitted that they shared fake news stories online through social media. Without information literacy skills to evaluate sources, reject false and biased information, and identify good information, many people may have a difficult time navigating this informational landscape.

School librarians are more important than ever in helping students become information literate. However, in interviews with undergraduate students reflecting back on their experiences with information literacy in K-12 education, many students viewed their information literacy skills as being self-taught (Latham & Gross, 2008); students with lower level skills were self-taught or had learned from peers, while those who had the most proficient information literacy skill levels were taught by school librarians and teachers. To aid in the expectation of information literacy instruction implementation in school libraries, more study needs to be conducted on what school librarians perceive students’ current information literacy levels to be and why they believe information literacy instruction is vital.

**Research Questions**

Based on experience and prior knowledge, I speculated that the main reasons school librarians perceive information literacy skills as being important would be because they increase critical thinking, combat fake information, and create a more informed democracy. I developed three research questions to guide this qualitative study:

1. What perceptions do school librarians have about why information literacy is important today?
2. How school librarians are viewing students currently navigating through and evaluating information?
3. What impacts for society, if any, do school librarians foresee from increased information literacy instruction in schools?

The goal of this study was to gain a greater understanding of the perceptions school librarians have of the importance of information literacy. The first research question relates to the reasons why school librarians think having information literacy skills is critical. These reasons reflect the importance of information literacy as a core tenet of school librarianship. This research question also allows for exploration of the surge of interest in the term “fake news” and if it has changed the way school librarians feel about the necessity of information literacy skill development or reinforces their original views.

The second research question centers on how students are currently navigating through and evaluating the vast amount of information available to them. This question investigates the existing information literacy weaknesses students have and what school librarians are doing to address those weaknesses. This research question also explores the impacts school librarians are seeing in their students from information literacy instruction, or, if school librarians are unable to teach information literacy skills, what those negative impacts are.

The third research question focuses on the importance of information literacy outside of the school setting and how increasing information literacy instruction in school can affect society. It allows investigation into how school librarians perceive information literacy's importance to society and if they believed that having these skills could help increase critical thinking beyond the school
setting. This question explores school librarian perceptions of the benefits to society when students become more information literate and are able to transfer this literacy as contributors to society. This research question also explores school librarians’ perceptions of whether having these skills in an age of mass information, misinformation, and fake news helps to create a more informed democracy.

**Literature Review**

**Student Search Techniques and Information Evaluation**

Because younger generations have had technology and information always present in their lives, these students would seem to be more adept with technology and have higher levels of information literacy than prior generations. Many experts, however, have refuted this belief in young people’s technology mastery because “the sheer abundance of information will not in itself create a more informed citizenry” (ACRL, 2000, para. 3). For example, Julien and Barker (2009) studied the development of information literacy skills in high school students and reported that the most commonly used resource for students to find information was the Internet, with Google was the most commonly used search tool, followed by specific websites such as Wikipedia. Students cited the Internet as being the best way to get research done because it was faster and the information was more readily available than print. Students’ “understanding of critical evaluation criteria such as authority, accuracy, objectivity, currency, and coverage were not evident” (Julien & Barker, 2009, p.15) and the study concluded by noting that these skills should be taught in schools before students reach post-secondary schooling in order to “participate fully in 21st-century life, in workplaces, or in their personal life context” (Julien & Barker, 2009, p.12).

Students are using the Internet for research and information gathering, but their information credibility assessment practices, including abilities to evaluate sources and select credible sources of information are unclear (Metzger, Flanagin, Markov, Grossman, & Bulger, 2015). Although students’ information literacy skills proved to be poor, their abilities to evaluate and select credible sources did improve with age (Metzger, et al., 2015). Therefore, the instruction of information literacy skills should be scaffolded through grade levels in school.

**Fake News and the Need for Information Literacy**

Awareness of the fake news phenomenon and the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation has been growing in the past decade (Fake news: Search term, 2017; West, 2017). The increased awareness makes this an excellent time for school librarians to collaborate and work with content teachers to strengthen students’ information literacy and information evaluation skills in order to prepare them to contribute to an informed society (Valenza, 2016). Although information literacy encompasses much more than fake news instruction, the heightened awareness of fake news, both as a term and as a source of disinformation, can open the door for school librarians to address not just information evaluation and fake news, but also the broader range of information literacy skills.

A Stanford University study (Wineburg, McGrew, Breakstone, & Ortega, 2016) reported that students lacked information literacy skills. In this study (Wineburg, et al., 2016), the researchers gave age-appropriate tasks to middle school, high school, and college-aged students. Data gathered from students completing their respective tasks showed that middle school students struggled to recognize the difference between an advertisement and a news source; high school students were unable to identify credible social media markings such as checkmarks; and college students were
unable to separate credible from noncredible sources from a list of search results from Google. Recent school librarianship researchers (Gardner, 2016; Jacobson, 2017; Valenza, 2016) have acknowledged the difficulties students have due to their lack of information literacy and suggest that multiple methods of information literacy instruction should be occurring to address these student information literacy shortcomings.

**Information Literacy Instruction**

School librarians have taken charge of information literacy instruction over the years because it is an essential component of information location, evaluation, and use. In 1997, Warmkessel and McCade wrote that integration of information literacy instruction into core content areas was necessary. Many researchers have since found that information skills should be taught within multiple contexts and content areas rather than in isolation (Farmer, 2003; Kuhlthau, 2003; Webber & Johnston, 2000). Information literacy skills and information evaluation have been best taught when teachers and school librarians collaborate to implement these skills within multiple disciplines (Freeman & Lynd-Balta, 2010; Oakleaf, 2008). Kuhlthau (2004, 2003, 1993) stated that the process of teaching information literacy was important and that it should be taught within core content and use an inquiry-driven learning and teaching approach. Breen and Fallon (2005) also supported a process approach and believe that developing information literacy in students can be done well using both project and problem-based learning. And Mokhtar, Foo, & Majid (2007) believed that integrating the process of information literacy instruction could be enhanced through personalized coaching sessions with students during and after instruction.

In addition to using a process approach to information literacy instruction, many researchers noted the importance of teaching information literacy skills and information evaluation beginning at a young age (Asselin & Lee, 2002; Tower, 2000) and continuing through adulthood (Kuhlthau, 2004). In researching college students who were preparing to be future teachers, Asselin and Lee (2002) found that these students stated that college was the first time they were provided with information literacy instruction. To help combat this issue, the researchers helped to develop a curriculum that broke these skills into smaller increments and taught pre-service teachers how to envelop them in their lessons and scaffold throughout grade levels; these processes involved high levels of critical thinking on the part of teachers and students in order to determine the reliability of information. Studies are still showing that more information literacy instruction is necessary in schools: Herring (2011) found that transfer does not occur often enough with respect to information evaluation and instruction while Pinto and Sales (2015) determined that both students and teachers need better information literacy training.

**Conceptual Framework**

Having been a school librarian for 12 years, my ideologies and beliefs about the need for information literacy instruction align with those of secondary school librarians nationally (School Library Journal, 2019). For this study, I chose to research one of these core values of a school librarian: information literacy. I researched information literacy in schools with a specific focus on how school librarians perceive the current state of information literacy in our students. Information literacy, as noted above, is the ability to know when information is needed, how to find information, evaluate it, and be able to use it effectively and ethically. There is a lot of misinformation in the world, and we need to teach our students at a young age how to determine what information is credible. We need to teach them the skills to become information literate. It is through the lens of a school librarian that I conceptualized this research; therefore, it is through the eyes of current school librarians that I chose to gather data on the current state of information literacy.
The information realities of today are different than they once were. Many sources of information used today are not vetted or written by field experts. As Julien and Barker (2009) and Metzger et al. (2015) indicated, students use the Internet, especially Google, to find information more than any other source. I worry about living in a “post-truth” world where people think what they believe to be true and factual is more important than something actually being true and factual. A Pew study (Barthel et al., 2016) confirmed that 23% of adults admitted to sharing something false. The explosion of the awareness of fake news is a good thing. It is making people aware of what school librarians have been trying to teach all along, but I also question if deep down people really care if information is true. Is it more important to people for information to match their own political and social beliefs and ideologies than it is for something to be accurate? Plus, as a Stanford study (Wineburg et al., 2016) has shown, students still can’t recognize credible information from misinformation. We all have inherent biases. Due to this, I worked hard during this research to make sure that I separated what I wanted people to tell me about information literacy from what they actually said. Information literacy is personal for me. I believe in the need for it because I’m worried about the world without it. The focus of this qualitative study was on school librarians’ perspectives on the importance of information literacy. Conceptually, I expected that the school librarians interviewed would focus on three major areas of information literacy importance. First, it increases critical thinking skills, second, it helps students learn to recognize and combat fake news, and third, it helps to create a more informed democracy.

Critical thinking is a major tenet of 21st-century learning. The information age has presented a need for people to think more deeply about the information they find. People need to be able to use credible sources of information in order to make informed decisions, problem-solve, and build new knowledge. The proliferation of fake news has continued to increase over the last decade. Not just fake news, in fact, but fake information. Many fake news stories are posted in order to encourage people to believe a biased viewpoint. Others are created as clickbait (inflammatory stories or headlines designed to get people to click on them) because more clicks mean more advertising revenue. The Internet and social media have increased the speed at which fake news spreads. People tend to read more articles that support their own ideologies, so they are more likely to share these stories with others before fact-checking them, a fact confirmed in a Pew study (Barthel, et al., 2016). Often even credible news sources, in the rush to be the first to “break” the latest news stories, will post information before thoroughly fact-checking. To minimize the negative effects of this, information literacy skills need to be taught.

Information literacy is necessary for a more informed democracy. Latham and Gross (2008) found that having a lot of information does not necessarily make citizens more aware. A Stanford study (Wineburg et al., 2016) reported that students could not distinguish between real news stories and advertisements labeled “sponsored content.” Students need to equip themselves with the information literacy skills necessary to look for unbiased viewpoints. They need to learn to question everything they find, make it hard to be duped, and make informed rather than emotional decisions. Critical thinking is required for students to become more informed contributors to society.

Methodology

Setting and Participant Selection

I selected three professional school librarians who are experienced and professionally active in the field. They are librarians who have contributed to the larger school librarianship knowledge base
through publications as well as regional and national conference presentations. Each has served as a mentor to new librarians as well as coached student-teacher librarians and practicum students. Choosing librarians with these credentials and characteristics led to quality, information-rich data.

I avoided choosing librarians who did not meet these criteria in order to avoid the production of uninformed, or worse, misinformed, data, which would open the door for bigger reliability and validity threats. Considering this, and the small size of this study and number of participants, I decided that I was more likely to get reliable and valid data on the topic of information literacy from exemplars in the field who were known for having strong instructional skills and were frequent professional development presenters and publication authors. To help increase the possibility of response variability, the instructional levels of the school librarian participants were varied (elementary, middle, and high school). Anne worked with grades K-5 in a public elementary school, Julie worked with grades 6-12 in a small PreK-12 private school, and Sarah worked with grades 9-12 a large public high school.

**Ethical Orientation and Role of the Researcher**

I met with the three school librarians in their schools and informed each that they would not be judged based on the answers they provided. It was also stressed that their answers would remain confidential and that their anonymity in the research would be protected. I built an understanding between myself and each librarian that we were creating research together, and that I was not looking for any specific results or answers to confirm pre-existing research on the importance of information literacy, but that my purpose was to gather candid information from the field about their own perceptions of the importance of information literacy.

Because I worried about inserting myself too much into the interview and the responses, I was conscious of both my oral responses and body language. I was careful to avoid guiding answers in the direction of where I wanted them to be and, instead, allowed the librarians to speak freely. I was conscious of my previous assumptions about information literacy and kept them in check to be sure they did not affect my study or the way I reflected the data I collected and analyzed. I took measures such as recording, journaling, and memo-ing to reflect what was said by the interview participants instead of letting my own belief system interfere with what I recorded and reported. A consent form was used outlining the human subject protection they could expect and asking for consent to allow me to publish the anonymized results using pseudonyms. All agreed and signed.

**Data Collection**

To tell the story of school librarians’ perceptions of the importance of information literacy, data were collected in the form of interviews with three experienced school librarians. Each interview lasted 30 to 40 minutes in length and was conducted in the participant’s school library. Each interview followed the protocol featured in Appendix A. However, some questions were skipped from the protocol if the participant and I agreed it had already been answered within a response to a previous question.

**Data Analysis**

Based on Maxwell’s (2013) guiding process, I read through and listened to the interview transcripts to begin the process of finding meaning in the data and identifying themes. After they were transcribed and read through, the transcripts were loaded into Atlas.ti for further analysis. I developed ideas for some key themes based upon the research questions for this study to use in creating memos. Then I proceeded to code the data to look for more themes. Once themes and
patterns were identified, the codes from the interviews were grouped and connected together by theme, and an initial network map was created. Attempting to present the data in accessible ways, this network map consistently evolved as more themes and patterns were identified.

Validity

I recognized that my relationship to this topic, having been a school librarian previously, could create researcher bias and that the assumptions I inherently have could have influenced the way I gathered and interpreted data. So, I created a validity matrix to help me avoid these pitfalls.

In developing the validity matrix, I was able to identify other validity threats as well. There was the potential for lack of variability in participant responses due to the professional nature of the selected participants. Choosing librarians who were very active and knowledgeable about the field of school librarianship may only give one point-of-view. However, I did not find this to be a problem once I collected the data and began analyzing the results.

An additional validity threat was that when I scheduled interviews to talk about information literacy with each school librarian, there was the potential for participants to research preexisting information on the topic on the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) website before our interview. I was concerned this would result in more “textbook” answers instead of genuine answers. Initially, I thought I could reduce this validity threat by abstaining from telling participants the interview topic ahead of time. But, I ultimately decided that not telling the participants the topic of the interview at the time it was scheduled may sound elusive, which, in turn, would limit their trust in me. So, instead, I did my best to set the stage before hand to increase comfort level and verify that I was looking for genuine personal and professional reflections and responses rather than rote answers gleaned from researching the topic ahead of time. This threat ended up being moot because, as I had suspected may be the case, all three librarians said their busy schedules did not afford the time to look up information beforehand, so they didn’t even consider it.

Reactivity could have also been a validity threat. As a former school librarian, I was acquainted with all three participants. I did not want social desirability or pleasing the researcher to be an issue since I was the one conducting the interviews with people I knew. The participants were aware of my prior knowledge on the topic of information literacy, which I worried could limit their responses. However, I did not find this to be a problem during the interviews. Setting the stage beforehand and allowing a natural rapport to remain throughout the interview opened the door for very genuine, valid responses and rich data.

Findings

Using the data analysis strategy previously mentioned, four themes emerged from the data. These themes go well with the research questions for this study and the overall purpose of learning school librarians’ perceptions of information literacy.

Context of Information Today

“It’s pretty sad, actually, how uninformed we really are. How overinformed but uninformed.”

– Sarah, high school librarian

In discussions with the school librarian participants, all stressed that today people find their information in multiple places. Before the dominance of the Internet and hand-held devices in our culture, information was found in the library in books or journals. These information sources were
vetted and didn’t have to be questioned beyond purpose. As Julie, a K-12 librarian in a private school, said, “They are constantly on their devices. They’re surrounded by everything. They’re completely inundated. This group of kids who are 14, 15 years old, they don’t know any different than accessing things online.” All school librarians interviewed mentioned the lack of vetting of information today. Now, misinformation is just as present as reliable information and many sources are not vetted. Julie elaborated with an example, “Everyone is just... looking at a ridiculous headline and making choices... without vetting that source.” High school librarian Sarah concurred stating, “How you’re getting your information is now changing and evolving, you know... these kids’ lives are so different than ours, the way that they receive information and get their news, get their recipes, get their WebMD…”

The librarians interviewed also note that social media is a prevalent and dominating fixture in the world of students and their parents, and that the issues that come with social media are connected to information literacy. They stressed that social media has become a common method to get news and information. According to Sarah, “High schoolers, in particular, have their phone in their hand 24/7. They are constantly Snapchatting and Tweeting and Instagramming. They trust it.” Elementary librarian Anne thinks this issue goes beyond students and to the community, “Unfortunately, most of our community gets their news from locations or spaces such as Facebook or Twitter...When that’s where you’re getting your news, and you’re thinking that's a reliable place, that can be a scary thing with fake news.”

School librarians on all levels showed concern over people purposely flooding the Internet with false information and how that affects students and adults in society. “You’ve got people inundating social media with complete nonsense,” Julie said, adding that students too often “share, share, share. It’s like a disease.” Anne also acknowledged that point saying, “We have to do a lot of talking about bias much more than I think we’ve ever had to do as librarians. What we’re finding is that many people who have an agenda push that agenda even if it’s absolutely untrue.” With the state of information today, they worried about students’ (and adults) ability to decipher between useful and not useful content.

**Student Information Literacy Weakness**

“They are in a bubble.” – Sarah, high school librarian

School librarians see many reasons for students’ susceptibility to fake information and believing so much of what they see. Trusting friends and family, without fact checking, is one reason. Sarah said, “They think that … they trust it, I guess. They think oh, my friend posted this or so-and-so-liked’ this, it must be true,” and Anne noted, “A child will come and say ‘My mom told me...’ and then everybody kind of freaks out a little bit. Then you have to reign it in a little bit and go, ‘Well, let’s look into that.’” Julie believed that it’s just natural for kids to trust, “I don’t think that they believe that there are adults out there that have such strong, deep bias or hate against another group, that they would go through so much trouble and effort to create something just to trick people.” Sarah added to this idea saying, “They want to trust. They trust too much. They are so inundated with information. And they think it’s always true and accurate.” School librarians also often note that it isn’t just kids believing everything they see but adults, too. As Anne said, “I do shake my head a lot at the things that people continue to push along in social media as the truth. But, I can see how easily people can be sucked into it. And, it’s concerning.” Julie added, “It’s breeding a culture of ignorant people. One-minded...single-minded people.”

Searching was a common weakness which school librarians saw in students’ current information literacy skills. Sarah lamented that even in high school, “They still put the question in [a search box] ‘What is the name of the first pres[ident]?’” And Anne shared, “Many of our students have been born and bred on Google, but they don’t really have any understanding of how to use it effectively.” Julie concurred stating a theme that recurred in all interviews, “Students go to Google, they type something in, they hit enter, and they click on the first link. That’s what they do. In fact, some of them don’t even click
on the link, they take the Google blurb that’s on top and just think that that’s the answer.” This is a problem across all grade levels they all agree. As Sarah said, “They don’t know how to fact check or not believe everything they read or see or hear.” Not verifying information is a problem, Sarah said, because “They don’t know how to be critical of websites.”

Anne shared another weakness that commonly emerged from all the interviews. “Stamina is the other thing that I think is where I see the weaknesses. We tend to be a very on-demand society, and our students are pretty much used to getting things instantaneously. If they don’t, it [should] teach them to persevere and build their stamina for researching.” Sarah shared that in high school, “[Students] want short cuts. They don’t want to put in that extra effort. They don’t want to cross check. ‘This website says it, so it must be true.’ They don’t want to take the extra step to make sure.” Julie explained the possible reasoning for this, “They value their time and when they do things [for school], they do things because they have to do it. Because they are pulled in a million different directions.” As Sarah said, “It’s never been personal for them.” Making the information and learning personal to students could make a difference in their willingness to evaluate.

**How to Address Information Literacy**

“I will not send you into the world not knowing the difference between real news and fake news and accurate information and propaganda and bias”

– Julie, a K-12 school librarian, to her ninth-grade students

All of the school librarians interviewed believed in the need for teaching information literacy skills, especially with respect to information evaluation and being aware that not everything is true. They felt a responsibility to educate students for the informational world we live in. Students “need to be more aware. More responsible consumers. Even more so than before when all they did was look up something in an encyclopedia. Now there’s so much for them to look through,” Sarah stated, adding that she tells her students, “You have to look at why [the authors] are saying it, who’s saying it, what’s their motive.” Anne told her students what her grandfather used to tell her, “If it seems too good to be true, or if it seems too bad to be true, it probably isn’t [true].” She shared that in educating students about information literacy skills, “We differentiate between, ‘Is this something that you are researching for a grade, or is this something you are just curious about.’” Because when it is for academic study, Anne said, students need to “look at sources other than Wikipedia that are more substantial and more scholarly in nature.” Building on the purpose for specific information, she also said, “We take time with our students and help them understand what is private information versus what is available for the world.”

Julie talked a lot about her strategies for teaching information evaluation with fake news and with research, in general. She stressed the importance of “making sure the kids know that when something says sponsored content, it’s an ad.” And for them to watch out for “clickbait. ‘When you see something that you immediately want to click on because you are like, ‘Oooo, this seems completely outrageous! It probably is.’” She shared a successful method she has used, “I gave them two different examples and they were comparing them side by side. And they were arguing with each other about certain things. They were into it.” This debate enhanced their ability to identify what was useful and what was not. All of the school librarians interviewed mentioned the effectiveness and need for using real world examples. Sarah shared a recent anecdote, “Actually seeing an interview with someone who wrote a fake story for money, [the students] could not believe it. They’re like, ‘That’s illegal, right?!’ and I was like, ‘No, it’s not.’ They were outraged.” These examples helped address many of the identified weaknesses by making the content personal for the students.
Perceptions of the Importance of Information Literacy

Effects of Information Literacy & Future Outlook

“I have hope, especially in this next generation of students, that because we’re taking the time to help them break it down and unpack it and research it themselves… I’m hoping that they’ll begin to be a little more cautious before they’re willing to swallow [fake information]. That’s my hope.”

– Anne, elementary school librarian

When asked if she thinks this problem will continue in future years, Sarah said, “Anyone being able to post anything still is going to exist. There’s no filter on people.” But school librarians have hope that information literacy instruction can make a difference in how people evaluate and accept or reject information. Anne shared her hopes that “people will begin to be more cynical about their news.” Julie worried more about adults today who are not currently being taught information literacy skills than she does about current students who will become our future adults. “I feel pretty confident that we’re educating our kids, and hopefully, in the next few years, it will start to wane a bit, but we’re not hitting those adults, which is scary.”

School librarians stress the need for information literacy instruction as a life skill. Sarah saw the need for information literacy as a life skill, stating that she wanted her students to become “more knowledgeable, more educated to be able to go out into the world, and when they leave school they need to be able to decide for themselves what’s good and what’s not,” and that after information literacy instruction “hopefully they walked away with [their newly attained skills] knowing to be safer and to protect themselves.” Julie agrees with this idea stating, “This is a life skill. Something that far into adulthood you need. And even learning how to analyze anything. It’s a skill that you need professionally and personally across the board.”

School librarians are full of hope for the future of people’s information literacy skills. Anne said, “They are constantly using those skills in order to be able to understand their world, understand the information that’s coming through, and look for relevance.” School librarians agreed that information literacy instruction can help create a more informed society. Anne summed up the effects of information literacy instruction and the outlook for the future effectively, by saying, “This is what allows us to go on into the world to be able to analyze our own information. To look at news and decide, ’Is it real? Is it fake?’ It allows us to be educated and literate adults in a society where information is all over.”

Conclusion

The three research questions for this study focused on school librarian perceptions of the importance of information literacy, how students are currently navigating through information, and what impacts school librarians believe increased information literacy instruction could have on society. Across the board, school librarians perceived issues with the context of information and how students use it today. The biggest issues are students’ quick acquisition of information and their tendency to share the information without evaluating it or thinking about it critically. School librarians report that students’ current navigation skills are weak especially because of the amount of misinformation they trust and their lack of source evaluation skills. The lack of in-depth, thoughtful search skills and the stamina to cross-check all sources and persevere when faced with researching difficulties are commonly seen as major student navigation issues. To combat this, school librarians stress the need to make these skills personal using real-world examples of misinformation and bias compared with accurate, unbiased information. Overall, however, school librarians are optimistic about the future. They believe that increased information literacy instruction will change the way students evaluate and either accept or reject information, and that this will lead to a more informed democracy as students graduate and become contributing citizens in society.
Implications for Practice

Through this study, awareness of the necessity for information literacy could impact policy and practice decisions in schools to increase these 21st-century skills in all students. Implementing more information literacy instruction and encouraging teachers to partner with their school librarians in order to achieve this could become a school standard. The world of information has evolved and will continue to do so. School policies and practice need to keep up to truly prepare our students.

Implications for Future Research

This study can have scholarly implications for understanding why information literacy is necessary more now than ever. Critical thinking, fake news and source awareness, and contributing to a more informed democracy can all be attained through information literacy. These are all important life skills students should have. The instruction needs to begin now, so that future adults have the ability to analyze information critically and contribute to the world in a positive and informed way. The data presented ideas that adults don’t have information literacy skills either. Future research could explore whether there is an age discrepancy in information literacy between students and adults and whether or not current effects to teach these skills are making today’s youths more aware and information literate than older generations.

References

American Association of School Librarians. (2018). National school library standards for learners, school librarians, and school libraries. Chicago: ALA Editions.

Asselin, M. M., & Lee, E. A. (2002). "I wish someone had taught me": Information literacy in a teacher education program. Teacher Librarian, 30(2), 10-17.

Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). (2000). ACRL standards: Information literacy competency standards for higher education. Retrieved from https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/19242/22395

Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). (1989). Presidential committee on information literacy: Final report. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/whitepapers/presidential

Barthel, M., Mitchell, A., & Holcomb, J. (2016). Many Americans believe fake news is sowing confusion. Retrieved from https://www.journalism.org/2016/12/15/many-americans-believe-fake-news-is-sowing-confirmation/

Breen, E., & Fallon, H. (2005). Developing student information literacy to support project and problem-based learning. In T. Barrett, I. Mac Labhrainn, & H. Fallon (Eds.), Handbook of enquiry and problem-based learning (pp. 179-188). Galway: CELT, National University of Ireland Galway. Retrieved from http://www.aishe.org/readings/2005-2/chapter17.pdf

Fake news: Search term. (2017, November). Retrieved from https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=fake%20news

Farmer, L. (2003). Facilitating faculty incorporation of information literacy skills into the curriculum through the use of online instruction. Reference Services Review, 31(4): 307–312.

Freeman, E., & Lynd-Balta, E. (2010). Developing information literacy skills early in an undergraduate curriculum. College Teaching 58(3): 109–115. doi:10.1080/87567550903521272

Gardner, L. (2016). Teaching information literacy now. School Library Journal: Extra Helping, (November). Retrieved from http://www.slj.com/2016/11/industry-news/teaching-media-literacy-now/

Herring, J. (2011). Year 7 students, information literacy, and transfer: A grounded theory. School Library Research, 14. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/al.org.aasl/files/content/aaslpubsandjournals/slr/vol14/SLR_Year7Students_V14.pdf
International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. (2015). *IFLA school library guidelines*.

Jacobson, L. (2017, January). The smell test: Educators can counter fake news with information literacy. Here’s how. *School Library Journal*. Retrieved from https://www.slj.com/2017/01/industry-news/the-smell-test-educators-can-counter-fake-news-with-information-literacy-heres-how

Julien, H., & Barker, S. (2009). How high-school students find and evaluate scientific information: A basis for information literacy skills development. *Library & Information Science Research*, 31(1), 12-17. doi:10.1016/j.lisr.2008.10.008

Kuhlthau, C.C. (2003). Rethinking libraries for the information age school: Vital roles in inquiry learning. *Library skills*. *School Libraries in Canada*, 22(4): 3–5.

Kuhlthau, C.C. (1993). A principle of uncertainty for information seeking. *The Journal of Documentation*, 49(4): 339–55.

Latham, D., & Gross, M. (2008). Broken links: Undergraduates look back on their experiences with information literacy in K-12 education. *School Library Media Research, 11*. Retrieved from http://www.al.org/aasl/sites/al.org.aasl/files/content/aaslpubsandjournals/slr/vol11/SLMR_Broken Links_V11.pdf

Maxwell, J. (2013). *Qualitative research design*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications.

Metzger, M. J., Flanagan, A. J., Markov, A., Grossman, R., & Bulger, M. (2015). Believing the unbelievable: Understanding young people’s information literacy beliefs and practices in the United States. *Journal of Children and Media*, 9(3), 325-348. doi:10.1080/17482798.2015.1056817

Mokhtar, I., Foo, S., & Majid, S. (2007). Guide me, show me: Personalised coaching as a means of instilling information literacy competencies in students. *LIBRES Library and Information Science Research Electronic Journal, 17*(2): 1-19.

Oakleaf, M. (2008). Dangers and opportunities: A conceptual map of information literacy assessment approaches. *Libraries and the Academy, 8*(3): 233–253. doi:10.1353/pla.0.0011

Pinto, M., & Sales, D. (2015). Uncovering information literacy’s disciplinary differences through students’ attitudes: An empirical study. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 47(3), 204–215. doi:10.1177/0961000614532675

Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On The Horizon, 9*(5), 1-6. doi: 10.1108/10748120110424816

School Library Journal. (2019). *Information literacy/college readiness survey: A survey of U.S. high school and middle school librarians*. Retrieved from https://s3.amazonaws.com/WebVault/research/Information%20Literacy%20Report-FINAL.pdf

Spisak, J. (2018). *Secondary student information literacy self-efficacy vs. performance*. [Doctoral dissertation]. Virginia Commonwealth University.

Tower, C. (2000). Questions that matter: Preparing elementary students for the inquiry process. *Reading Teacher, 53*, 550-557.

Tyner, K. (2009). Audiences, intertextuality, and new media literacy. *International Journal of Learning and Media, 1*(2), 25–31. doi: 10.1162/ijlm.2009.0020

Valenza, J. (2016). Truth, truthiness, triangulation: A news literacy toolkit for a “post truth” world. Retrieved from http://blogs.slj.com/neverendingsearch/2016/11/26/truth-truthiness-triangulation-and-the-librarian-way-a-news-literacy-toolkit-for-a-post-truth-world/

Warmkessel, M.M., & McCade, J.M. (1997). Integrating IL into the curriculum. *Research Strategies, 15*(2): 80–88.

Webber, S., & Johnston, B. (2000). Conceptions of information literacy: New perspectives and implications. *Journal of Information Science, 26*(6). Retrieved from http://jis.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/26/6/381

West, D. M. (2017). *How to combat fake news and disinformation*. The Brookings Institution. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/research/how-to-combat-fake-news-and-disinformation/
Wineburg, S., McGrew, S., Breakstone, J., & Ortega, T. (2016). Evaluating information: The cornerstone of civic online reasoning. Stanford Digital Repository, 29. Retrieved from https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:fv751yt5934/SHEGEvaluatingInformationOnline.pdf

**Author Note**

**Jenifer R. Spisak** is an Assistant Professor of School Librarianship at Longwood University. She spent 20 years in K-12 education, 12 of which were as a school librarian. She is the author of *Multimedia Learning Stations: Facilitating Instruction, Strengthening the Research Process, Building Collaborative Partnerships* (Libraries Unlimited, 2015).
Appendix A. Interview Protocol

Interview Questions

1. What inspired you to become a school librarian?
2. What do you feel is the most important part of your job?
3. How would you describe your school community?
4. What does information literacy mean to you? How would you define it?
5. Information literacy is one of the core tenants of school libraries. Why do you think that is?
6. Do you see a need for information literacy instruction? Explain.
7. What concerns do you have about the way students find, evaluate, and use information?
8. Tell me an instance when you saw a weakness in information literacy skills in your students.
9. Have you had any of these experiences with adults?
10. Current students seem to be more comfortable with technology and to be able to use computers and technology in ways older generations can’t. How do you see this affecting information literacy?
11. Fake news is a big topic right now. What are some of the issues you are seeing with it?
12. Why do you believe that students are susceptible to fake information, and can this issue be fixed or improved in school?
13. What are the biggest things students need to be aware of when locating, evaluating, and using information?
14. Are you seeing impacts on students when they have a lesson with you that involves information literacy skills? What impacts are you seeing?
15. What are some experiences you have had in teaching information literacy skills?
16. What do you see as the best strategies for teaching information literacy skills?
17. Are there any supports you would like to have to help increase information literacy instruction in your school? In general?
18. Where do you see the phenomenon of “fake news” being in three to four years? Further in the future?
19. Do you perceive connections between fake news and information literacy? What are they?
20. What contributions, if any, to society do you believe information literacy instruction makes?
21. Can information literacy help create a more informed society? If so, how?
22. Is there anything you would like to share about your perspectives on what makes information literacy important and/or how school librarians important in this area?