

FEATURE

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE AND SCHOOL LIBRARIES

7. Index finger



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Interconnections of

EVIDENCE,

ADVOCACY,

&

ACTIONS

Lesson 7

File No. 3145 J



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A professional focus on evidence-based practice (EBP) for school libraries emerged from the International Association of School Librarianship conference when I presented the concept. I challenged the school library profession to actively engage in professional and reflective practices that chart, measure, document, and make visible the impact of school libraries on learning outcomes. I argued that EBP for school libraries hinges on two concepts:

... the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about [school librarians'] performance. It is about using research evidence, coupled with professional expertise and reasoning, to implement learning interventions that are effective;

and

... [the school librarian's] daily efforts put some focus on effectiveness evaluation that gathers meaningful and systematic evidence on dimensions of teaching and learning that matter to the school and its support community (Todd 2001).

I remember audience reactions:

"We have to prove our worth?"

"This is not part of my job!"

"I really must do something with that pile of library surveys I have!"

"It is about what the kids do, more than what I do!"

I am deeply gratified to see the growing commitment to EBP and increased energy being expended

for its implementation. Methods for EBP are embedded in pre-service education of school librarians. It is a focus of professional development for practicing school librarians. At school library conferences it is identified as best practice and examined as a conceptual framework in research-based literature. In response to growing interest in EBP across the library sector, the peer-review journal *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* devoted an issue to EBP in school librarianship. (The issue is available at <<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/EBLIP/issue/view/444>>.)

Holistic Framework for Evidence-Based Practice

Since my articulation of EBP for school libraries I developed a holistic conceptualization of EBP as a framework for action. I posit that EBP is an approach to school library practice that systematically engages research-derived evidence, school librarian-observed evidence, and user-reported evidence. Iterative processes such as decision making, development, and continuous improvement contribute to attaining the mission

of schools: quality learning, quality teaching, and student achievement. EBP is founded on conscientious interpretation and integration of research-derived evidence to shape and direct professional practice. Simply put, a profession is, by definition, founded on research and scholarship.

At the same time professional day-by-day practice meshes professional wisdom, learned through training and ongoing engagement, with scholarship that shapes the profession. This practice forms a framework for reflective experience and understanding of the needs of our students and for judicious use of research-derived evidence to make judgments and decisions about how to enact instructional and service roles of the school library to meet the goals of the school.

At the *School Library Journal* Leadership Summit "Where's the Evidence? Understanding the Impact of School Libraries" in 2007 I presented a holistic model of EBP for school libraries that integrates evidence *for* practice, evidence *in* practice, and evidence *of* practice; see figure 1.

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|---|---|
| EVIDENCE FOR PRACTICE | FOUNDATION Informational Existing formal research provides the essential building blocks for professional practice. |
| EVIDENCE IN PRACTICE Applications/Actions | PROCESS Transformational Locally produced evidence—data generated by practice (librarian-observed evidence)—is meshed with research-based evidence to provide a dynamic decision-making environment. |
| EVIDENCE OF PRACTICE Results—impacts and outcomes; evidence of closing of gap | OUTCOMES Formational User-reported evidence shows that the learner changes as a result of inputs, interventions, activities, and processes. |

Figure 1. Holistic model of evidence-based practice for school librarians.

Evidence for practice focuses primarily on examining and using best available empirical research to inform actions and identify best practices that have been tested and validated. This is posited as the *informational dimension* of school library practice, or research evidence that informs practice.

Evidence in practice focuses on reflective practitioners integrating available research evidence with deep knowledge and understanding derived from professional experience. Evidence in practice involves implementing measures to engage with local evidence to identify learning dilemmas, learning needs, and achievement gaps with the goal of making decisions that result in the continuous improvement of school library practices. This is posited as the *transformational dimension* of school library practice.

Evidence of practice, the measured outcomes and impacts of practice, is derived from systematically measured, primarily user-based data. Evidence of practice focuses on the real results of what school librarians do, focusing on impacts, going beyond process and activities as outputs. As the *foundational dimension*, it establishes what has changed for learners as a result of inputs, interventions, activities, and processes and charts the nature and extent and quality of effect.

These dimensions are not posited as linear and static. Rather, they are dynamic, iterative, and integrative processes of welding evidence from multiple sources in a cycle of continuous transformation. Data, information, knowledge, and wisdom generate practice and demonstrate outcomes of practice, becoming a framework

for decisions and actions. This framework, empowered by evidence, becomes action through advocacy, instruction, and services. I commend it to the profession as a planning and action framework. I deeply believe that the more our profession engages in this evidence cycle, the stronger the foundation the profession builds for the future of school libraries (Todd 2008b).

Need for Local Evidence

Since 2007 when I articulated the EBP holistic model, widespread concerns have been raised about the closure of school libraries in the wake of the emergence of digital information services. Widespread digital availability of information compounded the perceived invisibility of the school librarian's professional role and highlighted stakeholders' lack of understanding of the impact strong school library programs have on student learning. School librarians concerned with job losses have asked me to speak to school boards and other decision-making bodies and to present the research on the impact of school libraries on student learning. These requests concern me because they signal the wider community's lack of knowledge of the value of school libraries and the vigor around evidence in the context of saving jobs. The need for "expert testimony" also indicates a lack of evidence-based planning and evidence accumulation at the local level (Ellerson 2010).

This reality was brought home to me by the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia's inquiry *School Libraries and Teacher Librarians in 21st Century Australia* initiated in 2011. A team of 12 members of parliament gathered input from 387 written submissions and 12 hearings.

Findings acknowledged the central importance of school libraries and school librarians:

The Committee has been struck by the breadth of anecdotal evidence that it received demonstrating the significant contribution to learning outcomes in primary and secondary schools that a fully resourced school library, when staffed by a fully qualified and active teacher librarian, can make. This supports the findings of Australian and international research in this area. (2011, 118)

The report also stated:

The Committee appreciates that evidence-based practice takes time on the part of teacher librarians but agrees that documenting and highlighting examples of teacher librarians' successes in improving educational and community outcomes is critical to illustrating the enormous potential of school libraries to help students achieve better results. (2011, 118)

The report concluded:

We recommend that the profession as a whole needs to develop the capacity to articulate needs from research-based evidence and local evidence collected in the school. (2011, 118)

We are reminded of the central focus of evidence-based practice, school librarians' evidence of their practice, and the urgent need to build a compelling and diverse portfolio of local evidence deeply linked to the learning agenda of the school.

Advocacy, Evidence, and Action

The Australian parliamentary inquiry reinforced the interconnection of advocacy, evidence, and actions at the local grassroots level—your school. As I look back at my conceptualization of an EBP framework I recall the considerable investment of energy and resources devoted to the school librarianship profession's rollout and ongoing promotion of advocacy initiatives. Advocacy has become a major focus for the profession. In 2012 the American Library Association initiated a Special Presidential Task Force on School Libraries to create a national campaign addressing "the urgent need for active support and advocacy for school libraries to ensure the best learning experience for the children they help to educate" (Sullivan n.d.).

The American Library Association developed "Advocacy University" <www.ala.org/advocacy/advocacy-university>, a comprehensive clearinghouse of resources and tools for all types of libraries, and a library advocate's handbook. A large number of school library organizations feature advocacy on their websites.

At the heart of the advocacy agenda is a foundational assumption that school librarians are critical to educational success. All advocacy websites link to the body of national research conducted in the USA and Canada; the results of this research provide evidence of the value of strong school libraries led by credentialed school librarians. The emphasis of such research is students' academic development through information literacy instruction and the development of reading and literacy (Scholastic 2008). Multiple summaries of

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this research were intended to answer the question, “Do school libraries make a difference?” What is largely missing from these advocacy websites, particularly at state and regional levels, are the rich repositories of local evidence that showcase the work of individual school libraries. National evidence from school library research is tied to and exemplified by local evidence. The challenge for the profession is to move beyond simply reporting state studies to crafting a compelling narrative that starts with local evidence of practice and links to the wider formal research evidence for practice. Local evidence narrative is the missing piece.

Research for Evidence in Practice

Since its establishment in 2003, the Center for International Scholarship in School Libraries (CISSL) has undertaken a series of studies that explicitly focused on the evidence of practice dimension of EBP. These studies include large-scale studies:

- *Student Learning through Ohio School Libraries* (13,123 students, 879 teachers) (Todd and Kuhlthau 2005a, 2005b);
- *Student Learning through Delaware School Libraries* (5,733 students, 408 teachers) (Todd 2005a, 2005b, 2009);
- *New Jersey IMLS: Impact of School Libraries on Student Learning* (574 students, 27 teachers and school librarians) (Todd 2006; Kuhlthau, Heinstrom, and Todd 2008);
- *Ohio School Librarian-Teacher Collaboration Study* (Todd 2008a);
- *New Jersey One Common Goal: Student Learning Phase 1* (765 school librarians) (Todd, Gordon, and Lu 2010; Todd 2012); and

- *New Jersey One Common Goal: Student Learning Phase 2* (100 school educators: principals, classroom teachers, and curriculum coordinators) (Todd, Gordon, and Lu 2011).

In addition, a number of small-scale studies have focused on reading and literacy development in a range of contexts: summer reading, reading in digital environments, reading for personal enrichment (Lu and Gordon 2007; Gordon and Lu 2008), everyday-life information seeking of children and youth, and, most recently, an ongoing study focusing on collaborative learning in digital environments (Todd and Dadlani 2013). An overview of these studies is available at <www.cissl.rutgers.edu>.

Concept of Help

Collectively, these studies across diverse research goals, samples, and data-collection methods provide data and insights for planning and implementing local advocacy initiatives. There is a synergy in our approach to research and evidence that addresses the three dimensions of evidence-based practice. In many CISSL studies the central concept of “help” is embedded in the pervasive question “How do school libraries help students with their learning in and away from school?” This is the question central to EBP and advocacy initiatives. Over the years we have conceptualized help as institutional involvement through advice and assistance in information experiences of people—help as inputs—as well as the effect of this involvement on information users—help as outcomes.

In our analysis of the evidence a “culture of help” emerges as a core value. “Help” is critically important in education today, particularly as schools address budget and staffing

shortfalls, increased class sizes, and implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Advocacy initiatives must carefully articulate “help” as a key mechanism to address these current school challenges.

School leaders in the New Jersey study (Todd, Gordon, and Lu 2011) identified the following kinds of “help” in school libraries:

- The school library is a multi-disciplinary and equitable learning space where all subjects are represented;
- The school library’s mosaic of knowledge and global access creates an environment where learning is respected and pursued, helped and nurtured in safe and critical ways through curriculum-centered instruction and resource-based inquiry that enables deep engagement with texts to produce deep knowledge;
- Learning in the school library is viewed as a process of discovery, developing research and inquiry capabilities. The school library is defined and distinguished as a place that helps them to learn how to learn through mastery of resource, critical thinking and knowledge-building competencies;
- The school library is seen as key to the school’s mission to produce engaged and motivated readers and informed learners who can thrive in a digital, knowledge-based world;
- The school librarian is central to learning because s/he is viewed as a partner teacher enabling the information-to-knowledge journey of students;
- The learning-centered work of the school librarian helps define the school library as a pedagogical center;

- The school library offers a learning environment that is not based on “the right answer” prompted by rote learning, but on a more complex model of teaching and learning that is inquiry-driven and which embeds a range of information and digital literacies;
- Students want to be in the library. They view it as their information and technological home and value the expert guidance and help they receive. (Todd, Gordon, and Lu 2011, 26, 27)

Our research findings, along with the data collection instruments we developed, provide an adaptable framework and tool for individual school librarians to gather local evidence and to embed the findings into local and state advocacy initiatives. The challenge for EBP and school library advocacy is to articulate a “culture of help” in the context of individual schools and needs. These “helps” can be connected positively to pressures that exist in schools, particularly the CCSS’s emphasis on students’ ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas, and to conduct original research to answer questions or solve problems. Students are expected to integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information and synthesize multiple interpretations, identify and address conflicting information, and create clear and coherent knowledge representations that demonstrate their knowledge-building and research capabilities. Evidence and advocacy initiatives challenge us to explicate the outcome of each school library in relation to knowledge development through rich evidence-filled local narratives surrounding deep reading for comprehension and meaning making—the foundation for the personal construction of knowledge.



In many CISSL studies the central concept of “help” is embedded in the pervasive question “How do school libraries help students with their learning in and away from school?” This is the question central to EBP and advocacy initiatives.

School Librarians as Agents of Transformation

Why not collect your stories of impact and help? Start with linking your instruction to CCSS. Build the narrative. CISSL has a long involvement in resource-based inquiry through the thirty-year research career of Professor Emerita Carol Kuhlthau and Guided Inquiry as a research-developed and validated instructional framework (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, and Caspari 2007, 2012). This narrative is *informational evidence for your advocacy practices*. Student learning outcomes resulting from an authentic and powerful inquiry-centered pedagogy that empowers learners to become expert consumers of information and producers of knowledge are your *formational evidence of practice*. However, it is what you bring to your work that goes beyond teaching a schema of skills. That is the *transformational evidence in your practice*. It is your knowledge-building capabilities: activating prior knowledge, building excitement, injecting interest and motivation for learning, building background knowledge, generating meaningful questions to research, developing research capabilities, producing knowledge through information analysis and synthesis, and reflecting on process and outcomes. Your skill and expertise can make all this happen in your school library.

You are the change! You are the local action. This responsibility requires gathering evidence to make your claims about students’ mastery of curriculum content; critical-thinking and knowledge-building competencies; mastery of complex technical skills

for accessing and evaluating information and using these skills to construct deep knowledge; outcomes related to reading motivation, comprehension, and enrichment; outcomes related to attitudes and values of information use and learning; and the development of self-concept and personal development. This is your evidence agenda, and this is your future.



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