PUTTING TOGETHER THE EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE PUZZLE

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Why is it important to prove that school libraries add value to the school program? The National Center for Education Statistics reports that 20 percent of U.S. public schools lack a full- or part-time certified librarian (NCES 2013). In California the ratio of certified school librarians to students is 1: 7,374 (California Department of Education 2014).

Can the school library profession prove that school libraries are indispensable for a 21st-century education even though information is only a few clicks away? How can researchers and practitioners provide strong evidence to support their claims? What are the critical questions? Where is the evidence?

**Testing Is Not Enough**

School library research has relied on test scores as evidence of the value of school libraries. The research of Keith Curry Lance and others has provided important evidence from impact studies in more than twenty states (Library Research Service 2013). These studies link student achievement to the work of the school librarian (Scholastic Research & Results 2008). This research relies on statistical correlation between standardized test scores and the work of the school librarian. While this evidence is important, it is only one piece in the evidence puzzle.

The often-quoted correlation studies, which found that students in schools with school libraries and certified school librarians have higher test scores than students at schools that do not, were conducted by researchers who controlled for all kinds of variables. However, policy makers are looking for Randomized Controlled Trials (RCT), the gold standard of research, requiring random sampling and clinical trials. However, this type of research, though well suited for laboratories, is very difficult to conduct in school environments.

AASL is working toward the goal of generating rigorous, empirical research data that supports the claim that school libraries are essential for educating today’s youth.
a national meeting of research
exerts and school librarians, AASL
wrote a white paper that outlined
a plan for conducting empirical
research. Recently AASL issued the
white paper Causality: School Libraries
and Student Success (CLASS), which was
funded by a grant from the Institute
of Museum and Library Services.

The white paper captures the dis-
cussion held during the national
meeting and proposes a progres-
sion of research methods and
projects that will support efforts
toward theory building, explor-
atory research, and demonstration
research. The paper also outlines
mechanisms by which a community
of scholars can be cultivated and
nurtured toward furthering the
research agenda and its activities
(AASL 2014). The paper is
available on the AASL website
<www.ala.org/
aasl/research>.

AASL also supports school library
research through the work of its
Research and Statistics Committee,
the publication of peer-reviewed
articles in its journal School Library
Research <www.ala.org/aasl/slr>, and
a peer-review research session at
its national conferences. These
AASL initiatives support research-
based solutions for evidence-based
advocacy for school libraries.

In addition to AASL initiatives
there are alternatives to the
 correlation with testing data. Bates
College challenged the use of SAT
scores often used to predict how
successful students will be in college.
For the last twenty years Bates
College has practiced an admissions
policy of optional SAT scores. In
2014, in cooperation with the
National Association for College
Admission Counseling, Bates
completed a three-year study that
supports the idea that a student’s
high school GPA is a better
indicator of college success
than standardized test scores
(Hiss and Franks 2014).

This study joins a large
body of research that
has reached the same
conclusion. Test scores
are not the only measure of student
achievement. School librarians need
to look for evidence in teaching and
learning practices in their schools
so that students can not only get
into college but have success once
they enroll.

Students as Researchers
Another important piece of the
evidence puzzle is the local
evidence school librarians
generate in their own practice.
For years school librarians have
used evidence in daily decisions. For
example, they make acquisitions
based upon circulation statistics and
well-established selection policies.

Many school librarians conduct an
annual library survey.

However, the evidence needed today
is different from much of what
has been gathered in the past. For
example, the usefulness of print
circulation statistics and numbers
of visits is diminishing with the
emergence of e-books, the Internet,
and online databases accessible from
anywhere. Now school librarians
need evidence of their program’s
positive effects on students.

School librarians can gather this
strong local evidence of the power
of school libraries in teaching and
learning in their daily practice.
They can and do model the same
research methods they want to teach
their students. For these reasons, at
The Webb School our school library
program has worked closely with
the senior class advisory team to
redesign the required senior paper.
The Capstone project requires
senior students to conduct primary
research and present their projects
to the student body. Our seniors
must use peer-reviewed research for
their background reading. Students
collect evidence using surveys,
interviews, tests, experiments, case
studies, journals, and internships.
Students must prove that their
proposed theories are viable. The
educators at our school want to make
certain no senior leaves high school
without knowing how to conduct
college-level research.

While the Capstone project began as
a way to prepare students for college
and careers, it is also a vehicle for
evidence-based practice. School
librarians can create instructional
programs that shift the emphasis
from testing for right or wrong
answers to assessing critical
thinking and advanced information
skills. As a high school librarian
and the lead adviser for my school’s
Capstone project I ask my students...
to “Prove it!” when they formulate their research theories. For example, a student proposed that providing stipends or compensation for college athletes would result in fewer violations of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) recruiting regulations. Much of the research he found was from major news outlets rather than scholarly journals, so I encouraged the student to conduct primary research by interviewing NCAA officials and coaches through e-mail. Part of the student’s theory became reality a few months after he finished his research presentation. The NCAA voted to allow sixty-five teams to make their own decisions about stipends (Gregory 2014).

Another student found research about how visuals in advertising provoked a neurological response. She conducted an experiment with a sample of students, using product art with textual clues removed. After our school moved to electronic textbooks and a Bring Your Own Device program, a third student researched the overall response to and feasibility of e-texts. He surveyed parents, students, and faculty about this change. He also conducted interviews with people at similar schools about their move to electronic textbooks. This student’s research was presented at a state technology conference for staff of independent schools.

Modeling Research for Students

Since I require such a high level of research from high school students I want to model how I do research in my practice. In addition to improving and aligning curriculum with information skills, I work on plans and strategies for improving literacy. When I shared with administrators and faculty Kimberly Tyson’s article “25 Ways Schools Can Promote Literacy and Independent Reading,” my colleagues were
RATHER THAN FINDING CORRELATIONS BETWEEN YOUR LIBRARY PROGRAM AND PAST TEST DATA, FOCUS ON FINDING YOUR SCHOOL’S AREAS IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT OR GAPS IN INSTRUCTION. DEVELOP STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE STUDENT UNDERSTANDING AND WORK TO FILL IN THE GAPS THESE TESTS REVEAL.

inspired. I implemented two strategies: Encouraging Read-Alouds and Encouraging Students and Teachers to Write Book Reviews (Tyson 2013); and I will work with faculty to conduct class discussions and use informal or formal writing to check for understanding. Once strategies are embedded in practice, written or videoed observations and reflections will be documented to share with administrators and other stakeholders.

Another local initiative, Focus 6, is in its second year at our school. I am one of four administrators who teach specific skills to our incoming sixth-grade students. This year, to improve reading scores, I added reading for purpose through read-alouds in support of the Focus 6 curriculum. I plan to use picture books to teach complex topics such as foreshadowing, setting, theme, and voice. We will use surveys, polls, and social media to collect evidence. Two open-source tools for designing and delivering surveys are the customizable Pew Research Center survey <www.pewinternet.org/quiz/library-typology/create> and Google Forms <drive.google.com>.

At my independent school we conduct local independent studies tailored to assessments. My school uses a test called College and Work Readiness Assessment that measures critical thinking and written communication abilities. I have found both the preparation for the test and the resulting test data to be invaluable in my library practice. Rather than finding correlations between your library program and past test data, focus on finding your school’s areas in need of improvement or gaps in instruction. Develop strategies to improve student understanding and work to fill in the gaps these tests reveal.
"If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem" (Bass 2013). As 21st-century information professionals we must be part of the solution to Common Core angst, testing gaps, and insufficient focus on 21st-century literacies. The silence of doing nothing signals lack of evidence that school libraries make a difference. This reality became tangible to me last summer when a neighboring school board voted to eliminate three library positions because of budget shortfalls (Justice 2013). If school librarians work toward being part of the solution to 21st-century challenges, we will be viewed as indispensable. The thought of a school without a school librarian will be unthinkable.

Evidence-Based Advocacy

Before school librarians conduct research or collect evidence they face decisions about how they will prove their worth. What is really important in my school library practice, and how does it relate to what is important to the principal? The teachers? The students? The parents? The school board? How does the school library’s mission relate to the school’s mission? Without evidence that addresses these questions attempts to advocate for our school library programs sound void of commitment. For good reasons we may be reticent to market the school librarian or the school library because we do not want to seem self-serving. This is a common concern about advocacy. However, when school librarians engage with evidence and tailor their evidence-gathering to the needs of their schools and districts, they can present strong and convincing arguments.

School librarians deliver the evidence through evidence-based advocacy. The "Unquiet Librarian" provides great examples of evidence-rich reports that are enticing marketing tools (Hamilton 2012). In my practice I meet weekly with administrators and monthly with faculty, and I report quarterly to the board of trustees. These reports are visual, succinct, and impactful. Evidence-based practice is not only a tool of advocacy; it is a tool for leadership, and I believe the best way to lead is by example. Sharing the evidence is an important piece of the evidence puzzle.

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Works Cited:


