WHAT'S A SCHOOL LIBRARIAN'S EVIDENCE IN, of, and FOR

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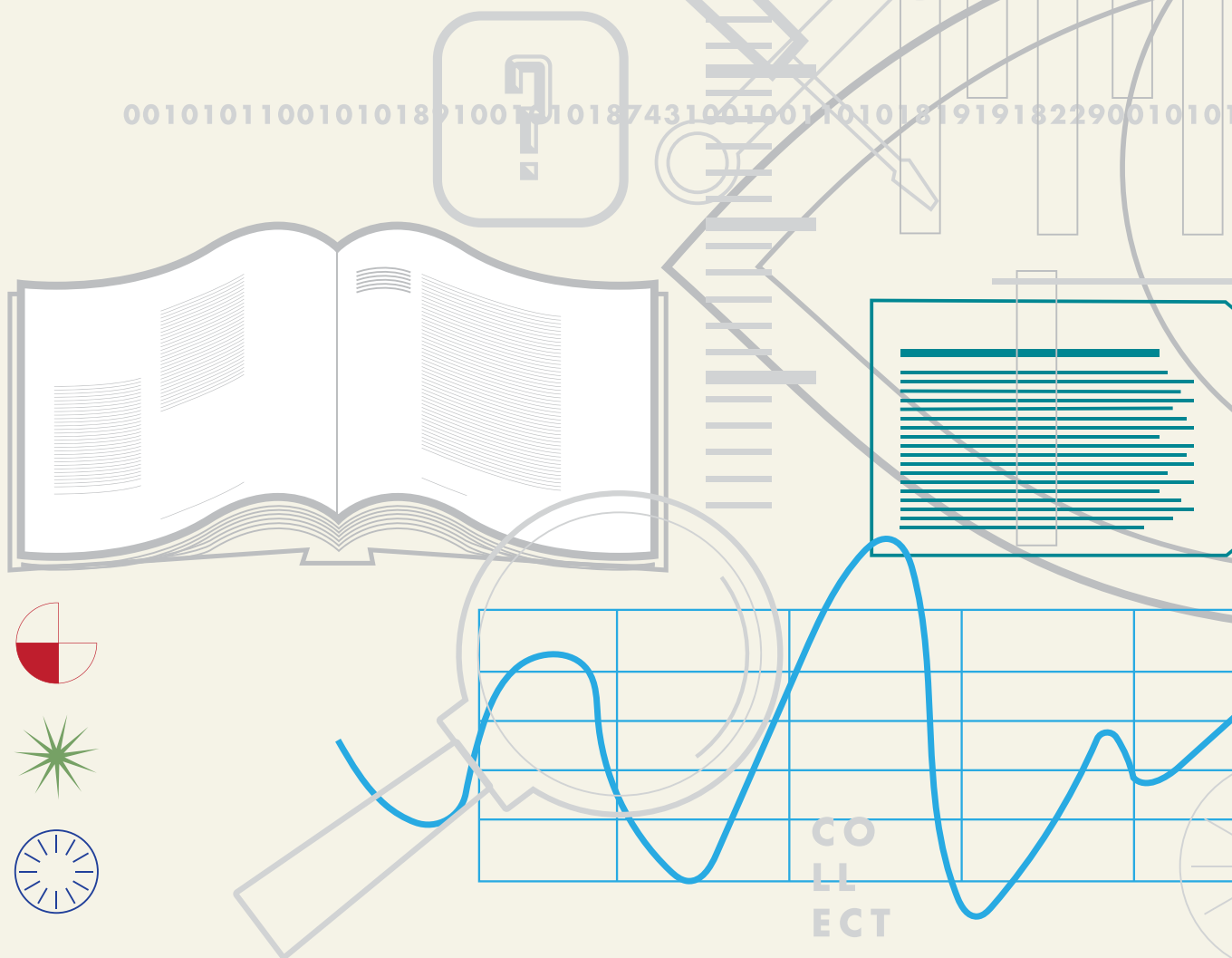
Jennifer Richey
jrichey1@twu.edu

Maria Cahill
maria.cahill@uky.edu

FAVORITE PREPOSITION?

PRACTICE

04

ANALYZE

2230

4005

2121

DISMANTLE
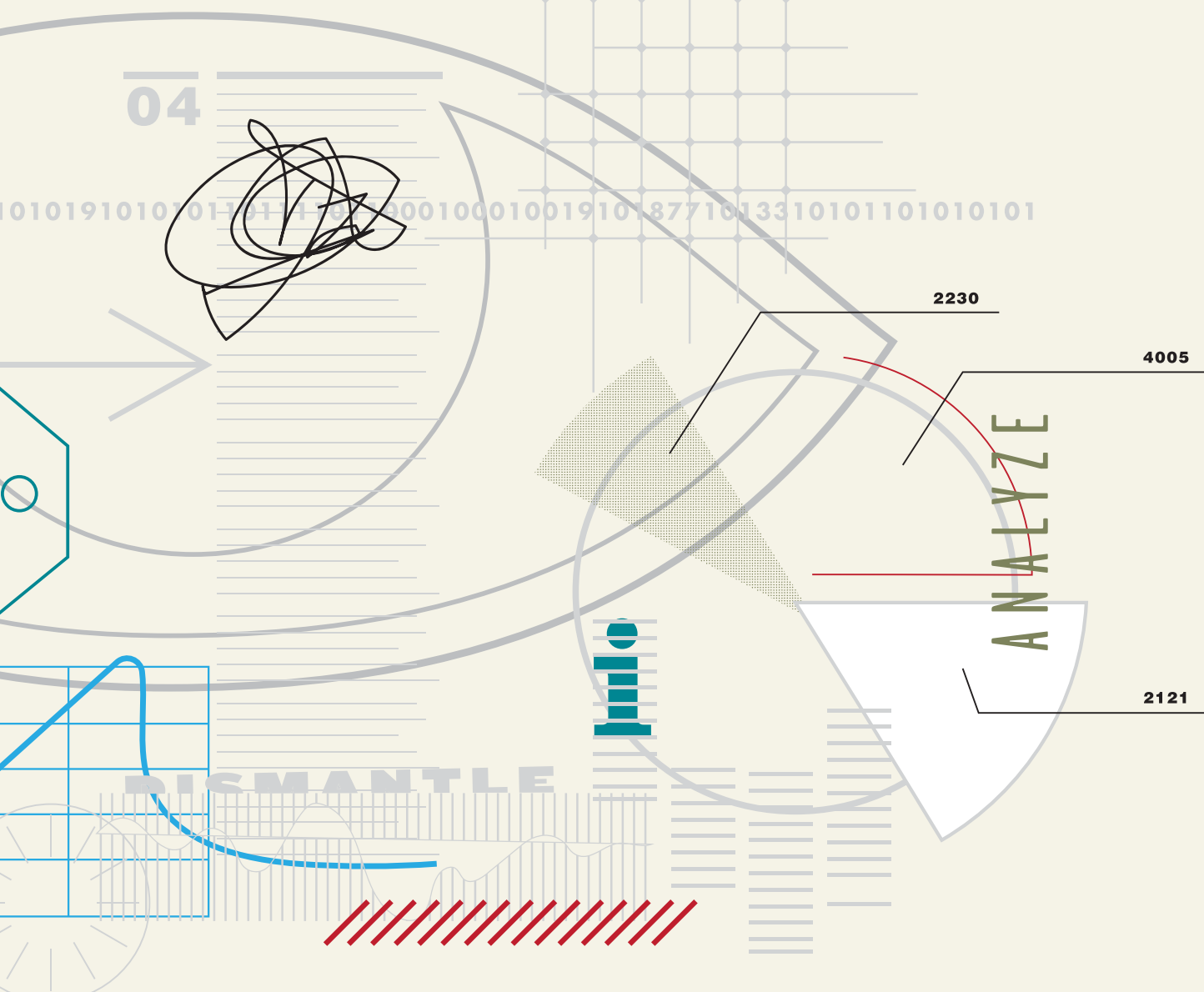
Need for Research on Evidence-Based Practice

"I'm sorry. Your position has been eliminated." Too many certified school librarians have heard these dreaded words, and many more worry about whether their positions will be eliminated. School librarians, professional library literature, and scholarly library literature tout the benefits of schools staffed with certified school librarians. However, recent reductions in library funding and elimination of school library positions suggest stakeholders do not connect the school library program to positive student learning outcomes.

In an era of teacher accountability school librarians are expected to prove their value by demonstrating how they contribute to student learning. Evidence-based practice (EBP) offers school librarians a cyclical and systematic process (Oakleaf 2011) for collecting meaningful data that documents student learning.

School librarians who demonstrate EBP employ existing research to inform their programming. They rely on their expertise gained from in- and out-of-school experiences, including knowledge of their unique school communities. They collect evidence that enables them to share their contributions to student learning and to improve programming and services.

EBP requires school librarians to collect, analyze, and disseminate findings based on rich and meaningful data. Instead of focusing on sources of data traditionally collected, such as circulation statistics and undocumented observations, school librarians can rely on EBP, which merges theory and practice (Eldredge 2000). School librarians are empowered to develop, implement, and assess their programs through standards, guidelines, and best practices research as well as empirical data specific to their school populations. Library programs are tailored to meet the unique needs of the school community and demonstrate the connections between the programs and student learning outcomes (Todd 2007).

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Dimensions of Evidence-Based Practice

Ross J. Todd (2007) has identified three dimensions of EBP: *evidence for practice*, *evidence in practice*, and *evidence of practice*.

When employing evidence *for* practice school librarians use external and internal evidence as a foundation for building school library programs. External evidence includes research published in scholarly journals, such as *School Library Research* and *School Libraries Worldwide*; national and state standards or guidelines, such as AASL's *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* (2007); and professional literature focusing on best practices, such as *Knowledge Quest, Library Media Connection*, *School Library Journal*, and *School Library Monthly*. Internal evidence includes data specific to the school library program, including surveys, information about stakeholders, library- specific data (e.g., circulation statistics, visitor logs), and school- and/or classroom-level data (e.g., standardized test scores and benchmark test results).

When employing evidence *in* practice, school librarians rely on their experience and professional expertise. For example, school librarians are familiar with their stakeholders' needs and develop mission statements, goals, and long-range plans to meet these needs.

When employing evidence *of* practice, school librarians evaluate the school library program in terms of student learning outcomes, using multiple forms of data, and disseminate that data to stakeholders through multiple channels of communication. Traditional annual reports providing circulation, collection age, and visitor logs are insufficient for proving a school librarian's contribution to student learning. Useful library-related assessment data demonstrates clear connections between the school library program and student learning outcomes.

Our Research: Why and How We Did It

Though a number of resources support school librarians' understanding of EBP and provide tools for librarians to design learning assessments, little research has explored the extent to which school librarians use EBP. Also, no studies have investigated the consequences of applying EBP to student learning in the context of school librarian retention. In 2013 we designed a study to answer the following questions:

• To what extent do school librarians apply components of EBP?

- To what extent, and with whom, do school librarians share EBP data?
- To what extent has formal LIS education supported school librarians' applications of EBP?

We conducted a web-based survey in which 111 randomly selected certified public school librarians in Texas voluntarily and anonymously responded to 26 yes/no, multiple-choice, multiple-selection, and open-ended questions focused on EBP implementation (Richey and Cahill 2014).

What We Learned

In terms of evidence *for*, *in*, and *of* practice, respondents indicated they were most likely to engage in evidence *for* practice. Reading professional school library journals was the preferred means of acquiring external evidence, with 83.8 percent of respondents reporting reading these journals. Only one-third reported reading scholarly journals. Respondents indicated that when developing library program goals and/or objectives they were more likely to refer to state-level guidelines found in *School Library Programs: Standards and Guidelines for Texas* (Texas State Board of Ed., and Texas State Library and Archives Commission 2005) than the national-level counterpart, AASL's *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* (2007). When using internal evidence, respondents indicated they were much more likely to informally solicit information from patron groups or to collect library-specific data such as circulation statistics than to formally survey stakeholders or to collect and analyze school- and/or classroom-level data such as standardized test scores, benchmark results, and disciplinary referral logs.

Evidence *in* practice behaviors varied considerably. The majority of respondents had library program mission statements in place, but slightly more than half had developed formal goals for their practice. Interestingly, only 15 percent of school librarians had developed long-range plans; however, most of the respondents reported that they were working toward meeting program goals.

Respondents also varied widely in their application of evidence *of* practice. School librarians overwhelmingly reported sharing data. More than three-quarters of respondents said they shared their library goals with administration and nearly as many shared their library goals with teachers. Furthermore, a majority reported sharing with administrators additional library-related data, such as circulation statistics, visitor logs, formal evaluations, LIS literature, and anecdotal evidence, and more than one-third reported sharing with teachers those types of evidence.

School librarians' reasons for sharing information with stakeholders fell into three categories. The primary purpose for sharing information was to bolster the likelihood of gaining, increasing, or securing something. For example, one school librarian indicated sharing information to "show usage [and] validate need for funding and [the school librarian's] position." Another reported, "I hope to achieve value for the library program and the realization that the library program plays a role in student achievement."

A second category of responses related to sharing information for the purpose of keeping stakeholders informed about the library program and its contributions to the school community and/or student learning. These responses are illustrative of those in this category: "To show our staff that their needs are important and that we are here to serve our patrons. Also, to show that we realize that needs are constantly changing," and, "[So] my principal gets an idea [of the] many ways I strive to reach every student with a diversity of activities…"

Finally, school librarians shared information with stakeholders to solicit feedback that would facilitate planning. A respondent described the type of input she solicited from stakeholders: "input from [stakeholders] as to the direction we need to take the library program."

A number of respondents shared incidents in which sharing of evidence was met with positive results: that is, they gained, increased, or secured something, typically funding or access to library programming for students and teachers. Disappointingly, few respondents indicated the data shared was related to student learning outcomes. Instead, most focused on basic library-related data such as circulation statistics.

About half of the school librarians stated they received some type of exposure to the concept of EBP during their formal LIS coursework. Slightly more than half articulated sufficient understanding of EBP for application into practice.

What Does Our Research Mean to School Librarians?

What significance do the findings of the study have for school librarians? How can school librarians apply the systematic EBP cycle to their everyday practice?

EBP is imperative for school librarians to implement because it:

- Offers a practical avenue to improve school library programming and services;
- Adds tools to facilitate structured growth of the program;

- Generates evidence that the school library program and school librarian contribute to student learning; and

- Positions the school librarian and the school library program as essential to the academic development of students.

Figure 1 illustrates the cyclical steps for applying EBP to school library practice: determining needs; developing goals; planning; implementing the plan; communicating; reflecting; and repeating the process after modifications have been made if/when needed.

Figure 1. Evidence-based practice cycle.
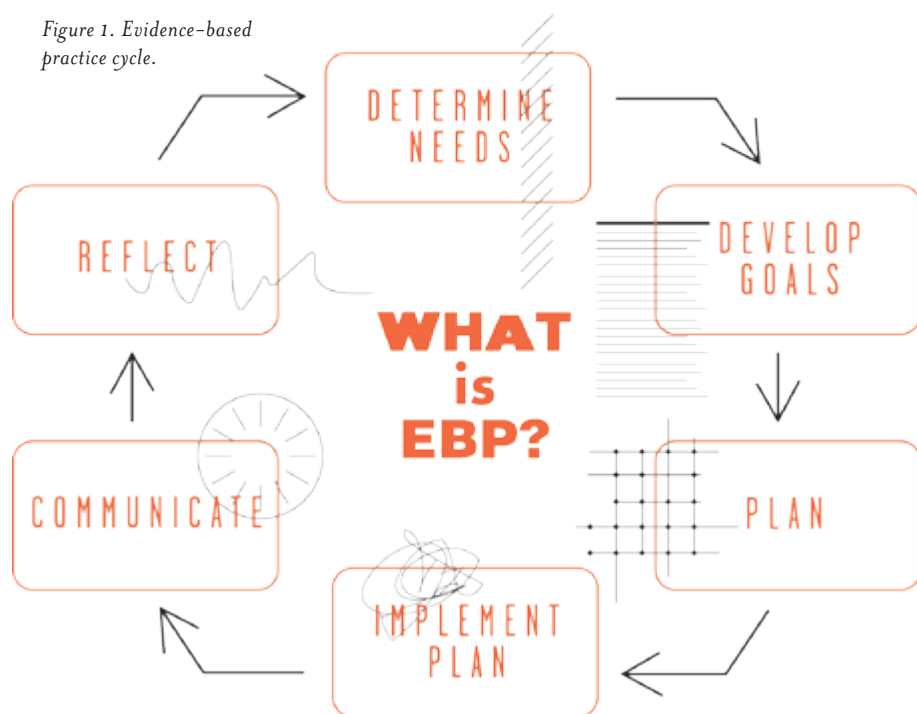
knowing, school librarians benefit from designing formal surveys to determine specific needs of students, teachers, and other members of their unique communities. A realistic approach is to consider school goals and focus on one or two and then identify data that points to the need. For example, if the school goal is to improve students' writing, the school librarian collects and analyzes test items that assess writing and then discusses with teachers the needs for support. After reviewing AASL standards and state standards, the school librarian develops a library goal based on the school's goals.

partners to collaborate on attaining the goals, considers the evidence that will be collected to measure effectiveness, and schedules routine procedures and days/time to collect and analyze data. In the example related to improved student writing, the librarian partners with one or multiple grade-level or content-area teachers to plan specific lessons, units, and/or activities that develop students' writing skills. These collaborators determine multiple evidence sources that drive instruction and measure students' learning. Finally, they schedule instruction and/or activities *and* times to analyze evidence. To ensure data analysis actually occurs, it is important at the outset to schedule this vital step of the instruction process.

Implement Plan: The school librarian is ready to implement the plan.

Just as the lessons, units, and activities are imperative for accomplishing goals, evidence collection and analysis are essential for measuring attainment of goals. Hence, collection of evidence for each lesson, task, and activity is crucial. Evidence focuses on assessment and appropriateness of goals. In the writing example frequency of visits indicates whether targeted students and teachers use the library, but such evidence does not assess how well the school librarian addresses students' writing needs. Types of evidence that might point to student learning, as well as whether or not the goal was met, include applied rubrics, surveys (formal and informal), exit slips, benchmark tests, and assessment measures demonstrating student mastery of skills taught in the school library. Traditional library statistics (e.g., circulation statistics, frequency of visits, and frequency of lessons) and anecdotal evidence, while useful for creating a full picture, are paired with more meaningful evidence.

Determine needs: School librarians determine the needs of students and teachers by examining evidence such as standards documents and through informal means. However, to gain full understanding of these needs school librarians gather and analyze school- and district-level data related to student learning outcomes. Rather than relying on informal ways of

Plan: Planning involves merging research and standards/guidelines with local data that informs practice. Using these sources, the school librarian formulates a preliminary plan for attaining library goals, meets with the library advisory board members to solicit feedback and formalize the goals, and shares the goals with stakeholders. The school librarian then invites

Evidence librarians have traditionally collected does not connect the school library program with student learning outcomes. After analyzing the evidence, school librarians draw conclusions and tailor subsequent activities and lessons to address unmet needs and to further enhance areas of strength.

Communicate: Though it is sometimes difficult for school librarians to toot their own horns, it is vital to communicate success as well as areas of instruction, programming, and service needing improvement. When library goals target student learning and school improvement, attainment of those goals appears less library-centric. Messages of success are more palatable when framed as "we" or "they" rather than "I" or "the school library program." School librarians communicate with multiple stakeholder groups (administration, teachers, students, parents) and the greater community, as appropriate, through various media such as videos, library websites and blogs, local news, announcements over the school's public address system, flyers, stickers, t-shirts, photos, and social media.

Reflect: Reflection throughout the process is important. The school librarian reflects during each step and activity to consider important questions. What happened? How does it impact effective learning? What do the data tell us? What worked and what didn't? What do stakeholders say about what does or does not work? What are the benefits of what we just did? Where are areas for improvement? How could the library program build on the evidence and reflection? What could the library program focus on next?

Repeat: Finally, the school librarian repeats the process. Naturally, the new plan will be modified and tailored based on previous activities, conclusions drawn from the evidence, and new needs.

Conclusion

School librarians' favorite preposition is *for*, as in *evidence for practice*. While building a school library program based on standards, guidelines, and research is essential, our findings indicate that collecting

meaningful evidence connecting the school library program to student learning outcomes rarely occurs. With meaningful data that is critical for decision-making stakeholders, school librarians can secure their positions in times of budget and staffing reductions. EBP provides school librarians with clear steps for planning, implementing, collecting, analyzing, communicating, and reflecting on their programs. In doing so, school library programs can better meet the needs of students.

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Jennifer Richey *is an assistant professor at Texas Woman's University in Denton. She is an AASL member and currently serves on the Underserved Student Populations Task Force. She is also chair of the Laura Edwards Scholarship Committee for the Texas Association of School Librarians.*

Maria Cahill *is an assistant professor at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. She is a member of AASL and serves on the* School Library Research *Editorial Board.*

Jennifer and Maria *coauthored "School Librarians' Experiences with Evidence-Based Library and Information Practice" for* School Library Research. *With Wendy Wagner, they also coauthored "EBLIP: How You Know, Where You Go, and What You Show" for* School Library Monthly. *Jennifer and Maria's forthcoming article for* Library Quarterly *is titled "What Sound Does an Odyssey Make? Content Analysis of Award-Winning Audiobooks."*