PROVE IT!

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. Following

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10 school positions to be cut

Librarian Positions Cut In Schools Across The Country

School librarians a rare find in California public schools

Is the End of the School Library Upon Us? Budget Cuts Hit Librarians Where it Hurts

a national meeting of research experts 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 discussion held during the national meeting and proposes a progression of research methods and projects that will support efforts toward theory building, exploratory 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

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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

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> For more on the school librarian's role in Capstone projects, read AASL's Senior/Capstone Project Task Force report, which lists exemplar projects and details survey results on the part school librarians play in these projects <www.ala.org/aasl/advocacy/resources>. The task force also released "Position Statement on the Role of the School Librarian in Senior/Capstone Projects," which is available at <www.ala.org/aasl/advocacy/resources/statements>.

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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