

School Libraries & Evidence:

Seize the Day, Begin the Future

By Dr. Ross J. Todd

Introduction

During my role as a school library educator, I have had a wonderful opportunity to speak to many school librarians around the world. No matter the educational setting, no matter the country, no matter the educational context, school librarians understand the importance of providing high quality information services to the school community. Our school library profession has a sense of common purpose and commitment that transcends national boundaries and cultural differences. One school librarian I spoke to recently from Australia expressed it so eloquently:

We are at the forefront of taking information technology from a frightening specter to place it within the context of education in a controlled and meaningful way. We look at the curriculum needs, and work with teachers to plan their courses and lessons, then set about finding the best information in whatever format, including Web sites, and applying the most suitable information technology—from simple pathfinders on a Web site to highly complex Web quests. We then teach teachers and their classes how to use it. Schools and teachers are convinced that we know what we are doing because we use every opportunity to be involved in curriculum planning and to sell

and to present our knowledge and information management to the school and the broader community. We monitor education and librarianship e-mail discussion lists and channel relevant e-mails to our colleagues. We publish good news about our libraries in every venue possible. We send our library staff to as many professional development sessions as possible."

Several things struck me as I listened to this dynamic school librarian speak about her role. There was such urgency and passion, focus and commitment. But I was left with one burning question: So what? Why does all of this matter? What if all of this energy and all of this work never happened? What if it stopped happening now? Who would care? Who would notice? Who would lose out? From a perspective of having been involved with our profession and its research for well over two decades, the answers to these questions are very simple. The learners would be the losers. Learners as losers? It is a frightening thought. As I thought more about what that school librarian said, I saw clearly a focus on "doing," and indeed, some very important doings—collaboration, curriculum support, professional development, information literacy, advocacy—all important dimensions of an effective

We need to **move beyond** this advocacy approach to our future, and to make an **evidence-based** practice approach the **public voice** of the profession.

"We employ our information management skills to manage information and knowledge across a whole spectrum of formats.

our skills to the school community: on councils, meetings, in-services, assemblies, workshops. We use our Web sites to best effect for the school

school library. But what does this mean in terms of students “being” and “becoming”? How does an effective school library help them? How does it empower their learning in and out of school? What does an effective school library enable students to do and to become? What difference does an effective school library make to students and their learning? In my view, these questions are some of the most important questions facing school libraries today. It is a matter of outcomes. It is a matter of evidence.

Sometimes it is so easy to see the professional barriers, rather than the outcomes. As I travel around the world, I hear these barriers expressed so often in so many forums. Like a common set of purposes that drives our profession, these barriers too seem to be common, despite national boundaries and varied cultural contexts. They tend to center on fiscal deficits: budgets, resources, technology, and time; as well as value deficits: perceived lack of understanding of the nature and dimensions of the role; perceived lack of value, importance, and appreciation; negative perceptions of the role of school librarians by others; and perceived low status. There is no question that the quality of the professional experience of school librarians is vitally important for the future and continuity of the profession. It is important to discuss these issues, and to work towards solutions. There is no question about that. But I want to gently suggest that too often these barriers become the public face of the profession—an advocacy for redressing the fiscal and value deficits: those things we believe to be essential in providing effective information services to our school community. My view is that we need to move beyond this advocacy/sell/public relations approach to our future, and to focus on an evidence-based practice approach, and make this the public voice of the profession.

Evidence: The Voice of the Future

The strong voice of the profession has to tell the story of how an effective school library makes a difference to the learning outcomes of students. This is not just other school libraries, but YOUR school library as well. How does your school library make a difference to student learning outcomes? If your local newspaper phones you and says, “We want to do a story on your school library and how it really helps students learn,” what would be your response? Could you quickly draw on a portfolio of actions and evidences to build your case? If your school board, in its efforts to distribute a meager budget amidst budget cuts, asked you to give a clear summary of how your school library has had an impact on the students in your school in order to help its deliberations, what would you say? And how would you know this? If your principal or superintendent asked you to provide an overview of the current research on school libraries and their impact on meeting curriculum standards, technology standards, on independent and lifelong learning, what would be your response? This is the mindset of evidence-based practice. Key stakeholders, educational policy makers, and funders sometimes do not convincingly see the links between what school librarians espouse and do on a day by day basis, and how that enables the learning outcomes of students. It is a question of evidence-based research and evidence-based practice.

Evidence-Based Research and Evidence-Based Practice

Evidence-based research and evidence-based practice ask three things of each of us working in school libraries. First, it asks us to have a very clear and precise knowledge of and insight into the research of our profession that demonstrates the differences that an effective school library makes



Dr. Ross J. Todd:

“The hallmark of a **school library** in the 21st century is not its collections, its systems, its **technology**, its staffing, its buildings, but its

actions and evidences that show that it makes a real difference to **student learning**, that it contributes in tangible and significant ways to the **development** of human understanding, meaning making and constructing knowledge.”

to the learning goals of the school. Second, it asks us to mesh that knowledge with our own wisdom and experience to build professional work practices that enable us to achieve significant student learning outcomes. Third, it asks us to look at our own school communities and work towards providing the evidence of how our local school library makes a difference—it asks us to articulate clearly and unequivocally how our school library helps students learn. Sometimes the most convincing

evidence comes from the local school, rather than from complex research undertaken in distant places. Principals, teachers, and parents want to hear of local successes and local improvement; they want to know how *their* students *in particular* are benefiting,

in making decisions about the performance of the day by day role. It is about using research evidence, coupled with professional expertise and reasoning to implement learning interventions that are effective. And school librarians surely want their profession to be perceived as a

important that school librarians continue to engage with this research as it provides a rich understanding of the dynamics of the learning process when students engage with information sources, as well as practical insights into how local evidence might be gathered, analyzed, and utilized to position the school library as central to the learning process. In a recent study published in *School Library Journal* (Lau, 2002, p.53) which explored principal's perceptions of school librarians, it was found that only 37% of principals said that the school librarian made them familiar with current research of library programs and student achievement, and only 35% of principals were made familiar with current research on reading development. It seems that there is an opening here for not just engaging with the research, but actively sharing the findings. *Carpe Diem*.

Principals, teachers, and parents want to hear of **local successes**; they want to know how their students — not other schools — are benefiting. Local outcomes matter.

more so than how other schools or districts are doing. Local outcomes matter. Local improvements are watched, listened to, and clearly factored into decisions relating to staffing and budgets. As part of the context of evidence-based practice, Oberg (2001) makes this timely comment: "Many people, including educators, are suspicious of research and researchers. Research conducted closer to home is more likely to be considered and perhaps to be viewed as trustworthy."

Evidence-Based Research

The school library profession today is actively engaged in research directed to understanding the multifaceted way that the school library contributes to learning. This is a worldwide phenomenon. A recent study published by Clyde (2002, p. 61) shows that the U.S. led in the publication of research articles and papers from 1991-2000 (41.5%); countries such as Australia (17%), Canada (9%), the United Kingdom (6%), South Africa, and Israel also contributed to this endeavor. Underpinning best practice in leading professions is the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best research evidence

leading profession in the education of young people for the information age.

Yet there is one disappointing twist to this idea. As a researcher, I know that communicating research findings effectively and developing effective practice on the basis of these findings is not an easy task. There is some recent research that shows that library professionals in the main do not read research (McClure & Bishop, 1989). Often the argument is raised that busy school librarians do not have time to read the research literature, or too quickly dismiss it because it is "out there" in a world "removed from practical reality." Such a stance both devalues the profession as a thinking and informed profession, and cuts off the profession from advances in knowledge which shape sound practice. A profession without reflective practitioners willing to learn about the advances in research in the field is a blinkered profession, one that is disconnected from best practice and best thinking, and one that, by default, often resorts to advocacy and position as a bid for survival. As part of their own ongoing professional development, it is

Of course, there is a clear message here as well for researchers generating evidence-based research. Those of us undertaking such research have a major responsibility to present findings in ways that enable and empower practice, and there is some research evidence to suggest that this may not be done as effectively as it could be. Turner's New Zealand study (2002) found that applied research that seeks to resolve operational concerns is most widely used; that research is not consulted because it is perceived to inadequately address the real concerns of practice; or that it is not presented in ways that foster understanding and application. One of the challenges that exists is the disparate spread of this research, and the need to analyze and synthesize this research into meaningful generalizations with practical utility, and librarians, as the information literate experts (and presumably with information literacy competencies centering on the ability to analyze, organize, synthesize, and evaluate information, and especially the information of their discipline) can surely play a central role here,

bringing insights as the reflective practitioners to the research and its outcomes for practice.

A Look at Some of the International Research

While the research agenda in relation to school libraries has taken shape only within the last 20 or 30 years, a number of summaries and syntheses of this research have been published (Loertscher & Wools, 2002; Callison, 2001; Haycock, 1992, 1994; Oberg, 2001 a, b). Within this corpus of research, Callison (2001) identifies important themes, such as instructional role, instructional methodologies, intellectual freedom, information search process, students' use of online technologies, program evaluation, and student achievement. Clyde (2002, p. 66) identifies growth from 1991-2000 in the focus on national surveys, information literacy, information technology, principal support, and reading and reading promotion.

Some of the most prominent work comes from the U.S., and hopefully is well known to us all. The state-wide studies undertaken by Keith Curry Lance and colleagues have involved hundreds of primary and secondary schools, and include: Colorado I (1993), Alaska (1999), Colorado II (2000), Pennsylvania (2000), New Mexico (2001), Oregon (2001), and Texas (2001). A

similar study has been undertaken by Baughman (2000) in Massachusetts. These important studies have sought to empirically establish the relationship of school library programs to student achievement, and support several common findings. These include: professionally trained school librarians do make a difference that affects students' performance on achievement tests; in order for school librarians to make this difference, the support of the principals and teachers is essential, as well as the availability of support staff who can free the librarians

from routine tasks to undertake their curriculum role; school librarians have a dual instructional role of teaching students in facilitating the development of information literacy skills necessary for success in all content areas and as in-service trainers of teachers enabling them to keep abreast of the latest information resources and networked information technology services within and beyond the school library. These are very significant outcomes, and hopefully they should motivate and inspire school librarians to pursue their instructional role, or at least to

OUTCOME	INDICATORS
Motivation: student enjoyment and participation and absorption in the set tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Verbal and written expressions of enthusiasm by students ■ Student willingness to participate in the activity set ■ Student appreciation and absorption in the task ■ Willingness of students to continue their work by returning to the library, or at home ■ A change in attitude towards work over a period of time
Progression: an awareness of or ability to use specific skills associated with finding information and sometimes the use and presentation of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Knowledge of and success in applying specific information skills related to finding, using, and presenting information ■ The use of new knowledge in work or discussion of new knowledge ■ Personal achievement or quality of work ■ The ability to apply skills or knowledge to a new situation
Independence: where students appeared to have mastered a skill and were seen to have the confidence and competence to proceed and progress unaided, either in or out of class sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The ability and confidence to continue and progress with a task unaided ■ Awareness of the need for help and the confidence to ask for it ■ Use of initiative ■ Increased self-esteem
Interaction: where discussion and interaction took place—with peers and teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Discussions with others about the task ■ Peer co-operation ■ Ability to mix with other groups ■ Use of appropriate behavior <p>(Williams & Wavell, 2001, p. ii-iii)</p>

question and reflect on their own practices if they do not include this strong instructional role.

The longitudinal research of Carol Kuhlthau (1991, 1993, 1994, 1999) provides some of the fundamental building blocks for the collaborative instructional role of the school librarian centering on information literacy development. This research provides evidence of the nature and dynamics of inquiry-based learning centering on the information search process, and the nature of information literacy pedagogy. With a strong focus on knowledge construction through effective engagement with a variety of information sources and formats, Kuhlthau's research establishes the cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions of the search process. Her Information Search Process (ISP, found to occur in seven stages: Initiation, Selection, Exploration, Formulation, Collection, Presentation, and Assessment) also provides a framework for gathering evidence on the learning journey of students as they progress from the time of the initiation of their research task to the time they complete it and reflect on its outcomes.

Scotland Also Leads the Way

Some very rich research on the impact of school libraries and learning is being undertaken by the Council for Museums, Archives, and Libraries in Scotland. Leading this research has been Professor Dorothy Williams of the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen, Scotland. The research was conducted in secondary schools in Scotland between August 1999 and February 2001, and involved focus groups with teachers and students in selected schools across Scotland. Both groups shared a common perspective that the school library can contribute to learning. The collective perceptions of the impact of the school library were: the acquisition of information and wider general knowledge; skills development in the areas of finding

and using information, computer technology skills, and reading skills; higher achievement in school work; development of a study and reading habit that encouraged independent learning; the ability to use these skills confidently and independently and the ability to transfer these skills across the curriculum and beyond school; and the development of interpersonal and social skills, including working collaboratively (Williams & Wavell, 2001, p. i).

On the basis of these areas of impact, the study also generated impacts in terms of Motivation, Progression, Independence, and Interaction. The table on page 15 shows some of the indicators of learning outcomes identified in this study.

One of the important contributions of this study is approaches to evidence-based practice. Evidence-based practice involves critically analyzing the accumulated data on the basis of indicators, and deriving statements about student learning outcomes. What is important is that such evidence is cumulated, analyzed, and synthesized so that a learning outcomes profile of students engaging in library learning initiatives can be constructed. In the Scotland study, the school librarians interviewed were aware of what they were trying to achieve, but were not sure whether their objectives were being met. Their study identifies some potentially useful tools for school librarians to monitor the impact on learning. These include: student observations of their activities and learning in the school library; discussion with and questioning of students about their work during and at the end of their activities; analysis of submitted work to identify learning gains; discussion with other members of the teaching staff about work, attitudes, and related incidents; and examination of reader records.

Australian Research

There is also a considerable amount of smaller research studies that examine more closely the

many different dimensions of the relationship between student learning outcomes and school library programs. One of Australia's journals, *Scan*, has regularly published research on the impact of school library programs since 1996. An analysis of some of these papers (Todd, Lamb & McNicholas, 1993; Todd, 1995; Jones, 1996; Moore, 1996; Hawkes, 1997; Grant, 1998; Lewis, 1999; Gordon, 2000; Maxwell, 2000; Rich, 1999) suggests similar patterns to the findings in the U.S. and elsewhere:

- A process inquiry approach, focusing on the systematic and explicit development of students' abilities to connect with, interact with, and utilize information to construct personal understanding results in improved performance in terms of personal mastery of content. This is shown in examination and assignment grades, and through the mastery of a wide range of particular information skills;
- Successful information literacy programs are ones that set clear expectations and manageable objectives, establish realistic timelines, and provide opportunities for students to reflect on their successes and failures with finding and using information;
- The systematic and explicit development of students' abilities to connect with, interact with, and utilize information to construct personal understanding results in: more positive attitudes to learning; increased active engagement in the learning environment; and more positive perceptions of students themselves as active, constructive learners;
- When students master a range of information processes—technical, critical, evaluative—they are empowered to learn for themselves; there is a strong relationship between an effective school library and personal agency;

- Active reading programs encouraged by the school library can foster higher levels of reading, comprehension, vocabulary development, and language skills;
- When there is access to diverse reading materials, more reading is done and literacy development is fostered.

Some research currently under way in Australia also focuses on the strategies and processes that school librarians might use to document their school library's contribution to learning. The goal here is to be able to provide rich, diverse, and convincing evidence that demonstrates that the library is a vital part of the learning fabric of the school. In our climate of uncertainty, particularly fiscal and staffing uncertainty, this must be a high priority. Data has been collected from 39 school librarians in which they have identified a range of strategies and processes that they use to document the contribution of their school library to student learning outcomes. These center around:

- **Assessment tasks:** not just assessing student work, but analyzing the output of students' products more thoughtfully to identify learning outcomes, in terms of new knowledge gained; evidence of skills application, evidence of reflection, and use of a range of information sources;
- **Feedback tasks:** collecting evidence of gains in knowledge and skills through simple checklist strategies where students indicate their perceived levels of skills and viewpoints before and after learning tasks—so that improvements can be specified. Even getting students to take a few minutes to record the most important things they have learned through the library classes will provide rich insights;
- **Rubric measures:** where students are first scaled according to a set of criteria that clearly defines

what the range of acceptable to unacceptable performances and information products looks like, and then where the school librarians analyze and synthesize this evidence to create a set of statements about student learning through the particular activity;

- **Interview measures:** regularly setting up informal discussion and review activities where students provide some input on how they have engaged with their learning, the processes and skills they have learned, and the benefits they see in relation to their classes and beyond;

sometimes it is possible to establish how actual classes have performed, and correlate these with information skills or reading programs conducted by the library;

- **Undertaking small action research projects:** this is where a learning problem is identified, such as low motivation for reading, plagiarism, weaknesses in information analysis, World Wide Web use, and a cycle of collaborative planning, acting, evaluating, and reflecting is implemented to address it. This is a structured, focused way of getting feedback on learning gains.

There is no question that the **quality** of the **professional experience** of **school librarians** is vitally important for the future and continuity of the profession.

- **More formal school surveys:** this can be any shape or form, and does not need to be a major research study, but solicits feedback on the learnings that are taking place. Creating a simple feedback checklist that the students can submit online at the end of their library-based units would cumulate a lot of benefits;
- **Portfolios:** with students' permission, you may wish to build up a portfolio of examples of outstanding work that shows mastery of information literacy skills;
- **Using available school data:** taking the time to thoughtfully review your schools' national, state, school, or grade-wide testing program results, as

Seize the Day. The poet Michael Cibenko seemed to understand this. He wrote: "One problem with gazing too frequently into the past is that we may turn around to find that the future has run out on us." Working with the evidence-base of our profession that research provides us, and using this to shape and inform our practice is part of building a strong future. Also part of building a strong future is providing the evidence in our schools and districts that our school libraries make rich and transformative contributions to the learning and lives of our students. Then the future will continue to smile on us. ■

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If your local newspaper wants a story on how your library **helps students** learn, could you quickly draw on a portfolio of actions and **evidences** to build your case?

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