Accountability and the school teacher librarian

David V. Loertscher
& Blanche Woolls

Teacher-librarian positions are often threatened in times of lack of funding. One of the "excuses" given by those wishing to cut funding is that this position can be carried out by volunteers, by a clerical person, an extra assignment by another teacher, a part time professional or any combination of these.

Whether positions are reassigned or eliminated, funding to purchase materials and equipment that are essential if the school library is to pay its major role in the education of students may be lost. Too few teacher librarians have conducted the appropriate studies to justify their programs or their positions. One way this can happen is through the collection of action research data.

Action research has been defined in many ways. One of the more recent definitions was given in workshop materials used by Richard Sagor, "Action research is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted *by* and *for* those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the "actor" in improving and/or refining his or her actions."[1]

If the results of action research are to be readily accepted by other educators and the school community, accountability measures we choose have more power if they are modelled after existing research studies. Many teacher librarians have little experience in conducting research and are more likely to make an error in design. A tested design used as a model is very helpful. One need only find the model.

Much, but not all research related to school libraries is a product of governmental funded research projects and doctoral dissertations. Funded research is usually conducted in response to a formal request and may have a specific design testing specific needs for information. In reviewing this as a possible model, it is possible to expand as well as replicate the findings. When a government agency has funded research to look at the achievement of students in relationship to the presence of a teacher librarian and a good collection, this methodology can be and has been used as a model for others with

funding. Doctoral dissertation research may provide another source for research design models..

Survivors of doctoral programs learn how to conduct research. Their task is to demonstrate to a committee that they are able to carry out a study from beginning questions through finished product. For those who are interested in research related to children and schools, being able to conduct a study becomes difficult because permission is needed to involve students. Many school officials consider required testing invasive and too time consuming even to consider an outside study. When the researcher is a member of the teaching staff of a school district, it is easier than it is for an "outsider" to propose the study. Being a "local" has its advantages.

This is one of the reasons the two authors of this paper originated the concept, Treasure Mountain Research Retreat[2], a short conference of practitioners and researchers meeting to discuss research and its application to the school library. Practitioners learn of the most recent research being conducted and researchers learn of research needed for the teacher librarian. Should collaborative projects evolve from Treasure Mountain, the researcher would not only be conducting needed research, but could also have a population available to "test;" a win-win situation.

The last Treasure Mountain[3] was held in spring 2002 with funding from the Institute for Museums and Library Services. Doctoral students were invited to attend and participate with other researchers at no personal expense. Remarks of three of the speakers, Lance, Todd, and Haycock, fit well as a platform for this discussion of accountability for they gave examples of research that had been conducted. If

any school librarian prepares to tackle the challenge of accountability, their comments provide an introduction to action research possibilities.

Keith Curry Lance is well known for his national and state government funded studies of student achievement showing that professional teacher librarians and well stocked school libraries make a difference. His premise to the audience was that research in school libraries and their importance in the teaching and learning of students has a longer history than many teacher librarians realize. He cited Mary Virginia Gaver's study of children's reading reported in the early fifties. This study as do many others used an experimental research methodology making their replication in the school situation more difficult because of the requirement of a control group as well as an experimental group. This means that one group is given a "treatment" and another, the control group, is not. It is always difficult for a teacher librarian to deprive any student of a new experience, thus losing the control group aspect of the research. Lance's own research shows how studies may be conducted using available data rather than gathering new data with an experimental study.

Keith matches achievement test scores of students to the presence of a teacher librarian, an adequate collection, the amount of collaboration going on, the availability of information technology from the school library and moving into classrooms closer to learners, among other criteria. When you tie your research to published studies, you are paying attention to the competence of the respondent. Lance cautioned his Treasure Mountain audience to use research as a basis to build and pointed out that picking the right subjects for your research is

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critical. His suggestion was "Don't ask people who don't know the answer." Asking principals library management questions may generate more opinions than facts unless you are trying to point out the principal is uninformed about school library procedures. Choosing a methodology is another reason for the review of studies. Researchers learn one answer because they will have walked down one path to its conclusion. Using reports of their research can help you decide if you want to follow their path, walk parallel, take a different direction altogether, or ask a different question.

> "... putting research into practice involves conscientious, explicit and judicious use of the current best research findings in making decisions about the performance of the day-to-day role of the school librarian."

Another speaker, Ross Todd, discussed the challenge of changing the mindset of others. Their problem is one of ego versus student outcomes. The easy route remains "how we have always done this," and it takes strong evidence to overcome present practice. The emphasis is on image, support, rhetoric, funding, role/position, and being valued. He describes one solution as "evidence-based practice." Citing a process employed in medicine, Todd suggested that practice is justified in terms of evidence about the likely effects. Implicit in this are the concepts: "duty of care," "informed decision making," and "optimal outcomes."

To pre-plan optimal outcomes, teacher librarians must begin with the end in mind. Stephen Covey suggests, "To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you are going so that you better understand where you are now so that the steps you take are always in the right direction."[4] Beginning at the end is also advocated by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe[5] who use it in relation to

creating learning experiences. Determining what you want to accomplish and then planning how to collect the evidence you will need so you can report your degree of success becomes your model. If you want to chart your best course of action, you review the research detailing how others have accomplished what you wish to accomplish. At Treasure Mountain, Todd told the audience that putting research into practice involves conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of the current best research findings in making decisions about the performance of the day-to-day role of the school librarian. His remarks apply directly to the need to know research findings in order to build tests of accountability.

Day-to-day professional work is directed towards demonstrating the tangible impacts and outcomes of sound decision-making. This involves local actions, local processes, and local immediate outcomes. It is, nevertheless, based on establishing a sound research-based framework for decision making. Teacher librarians should focus on the delivery of services based on stated goals and objectives with identified indicators of outcomes. Planning should be on systematically demonstrating outcomes and end points in tangible ways.

Dr. Todd's assumptions, confirmed by the Lance studies, are that information and information services make a difference. Specific learning outcomes matter. The practices of school librarians are linked to learning and learning outcomes, and school librarians should engage in evidence-based practice. In a new publication, Loertscher and Champlin[6] have provided some data sources of learning outcomes including assessment of information literacy:

- Rubric score that an individual used information literacy to enhance a project after being taught in use.
- Rubric score that content knowledge was enhanced through information literacy.
- Rubric score that the local standards for technology literacy and information literacy were met.[7]

For the assessment of impact on reading:

- Evidence of individual progress in reading from measures other than state or standardized tests.
- Evidence from an attitudinal measure that the learner is both an avid and capable reader.
- Reading log analysis (including amount read).
- Points from electronic reading programs.
- Scores on writing assessments.[8]

For assessment of the impact of technology:

- Rubric score for use of technology in a project.
- Rubric score that content knowledge was enhanced through technology.
- Rubric score that information literacy standards were met.[9]

Loertscher suggests that teacher librarians regularly collect data from three sources: from the *organizational perspective* (size of facilities, equipment available, amount of funding provided, and size of collections or staff), from the *learning unit level* (various learning experiences that are designed by adults to interact with library materials and technology), and from the *learner level* (achievement test scores). Teacher librarians collect data using data instruments (daily, weekly, monthly measures), from the ongoing data collection to prepare reports or presentations, and from action research projects (studies within the school or district designed to answer local questions).[10] Data may be collected in real time, periodically, and for special projects. The last of these, action research projects require more planning and more time to execute.

The authors of this article have taught action research workshops and their training outline included writing a research question and a designing a methodology to collect and analyse data drawing conclusions, and reporting the results. However Loertscher has added a new activity to this plan and includes the reflection piece before, during, and after action has occurred and results have been analysed and reported.

Another new direction proposed by Loertscher is the triangulation of data-driven practice. Viewing the data from various vantage points is helpful when making action decisions. Creating data

at the learner level involves all members of the collaborative team, teachers, teacher librarian *and* students. Learners must have a significant part reporting from their perspective as well as the teacher and teacher librarian analysis so that students know what they know as well as their performance measures. Rubrics have been a great help to students in understanding where they are and where they need to go. This will help them understand if they are doing better over time and WHY this is happening. This can be supplemented by local and state tests. Teacher and teacher librarian will respond to their jointly-developed checklists and questionnaires. They will also have student portfolios to judge, and they create their own learning unit level measures.

At the learning unit level, the teacher and teacher librarian keep collaboration logs, rubrics, and assessments of learning. These measures will help the teacher librarian assess whether collaboration between them has affected the teacher's methods. In assessing these, they will need measures of content, content learning, information literacy, and technology skills.

At the organizational level, not only do teacher librarians collect data, they need to share the findings with the community. When action research is based on other well-designed studies, the audience will recognize that quality and believe in the reported results. It will make the case for implementing the changes requested by the research.

The final speaker at Treasure Mountain, Ken Haycock states the challenge to us that we have the evidence or can gather the evidence that we can make a difference. The conundrum is "Now we need only do it!"

Teacher librarians and school libraries have survived tough times in the past. In fact, the improvements that occur as programs are rebuilt are worthy of research and reporting. What is needed now are those confirming pieces of evidence to show the value of our collaboration with teachers, the impact of our school libraries on student achievement. "Now we need only do it." ✤

Footnotes

1 Sagor, Richard. *Guiding School Improvement with Action Research*. Alexandria, Virg.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2000. p. 3.
2 To find out more about Treasure Mountain Research Retreats, please e-mail David Loertscher (davidl@wahoo.sjsu.edu or Blanche Woolls (bwoolls@wahoo.sjsu.edu).
3 The proceedings from the last Treasure Mountain will be available through Hi Willow Research and Pub. and distributed by LMC Source, P.O. Box 2131266, Spring, TX 77393, web site at www.lmcsource.com.
4 Covey, Stephen R. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.
5 Wiggins, Grant and Jay McTighe. *Understanding by Design*. Alexandria, Virg.: ASCD, 1998. p. 9.
6 Loertscher, David V. and Connie Champlin. *Indiana Learns: Increasing Indiana Student Academic Achievement through School Library Media and Technology Programs*. San Jose: Hi Willow Research & Publishing, 2002.
7 *Ibid.*, p. 107.
8 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
9 *Ibid.*, p. 91.
10 *Ibid.*, p. 19.